AUGUST 1996

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plus and interview with

Joe R. Lansdale



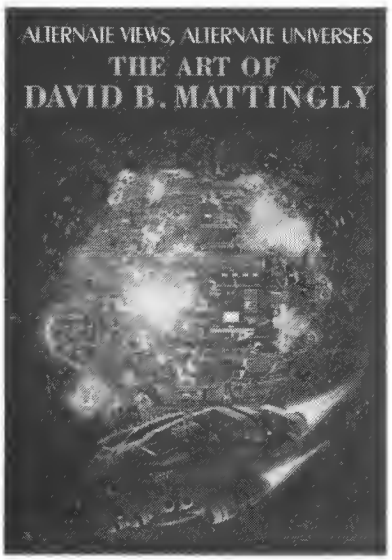
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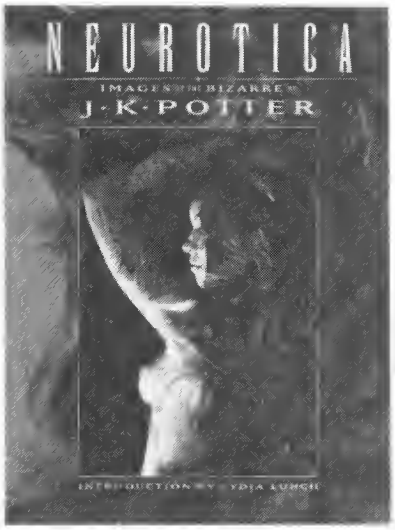
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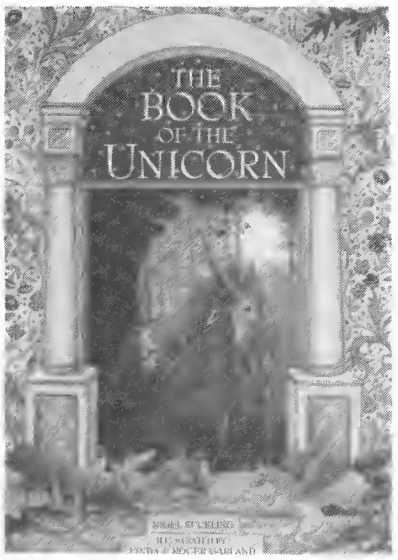
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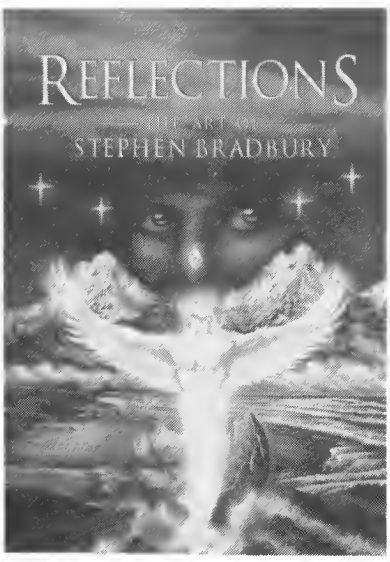
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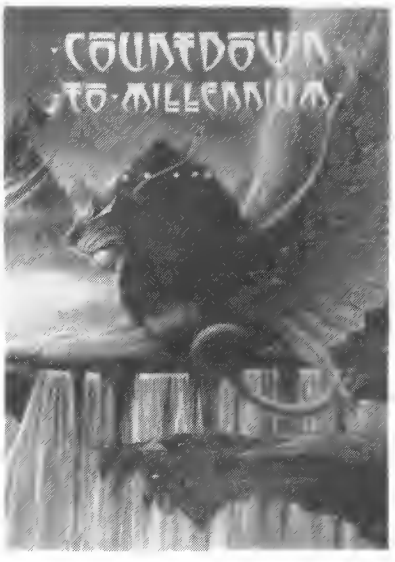
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217 Preston Drove, Brighton BN1 6FL, United Kingdom.
All subscriptions, back-issue orders, general correspondence, books for review, and enquiries about advertising should be sent to this address.
Subscriptions:
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Lifetime subscriptions:
Lifetime subscriptions: £300 (UK); £360 (overseas); $560 (USA).
Back-issues
of *Interzone* are available at £2.75 each in the UK (£3.20 each overseas), postage included. (US dollar price: $5.50 Air Saver.)
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August 1996

Interzone 110

science fiction & fantasy

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Published monthly. All material is © *Interzone*, 1996, on behalf of the various contributors

ISSN 0264-3596

Printed by KP Litho Ltd, Brighton

Trade distribution: Diamond Magazine Distribution Ltd., Unit 7, Rother Ironworks, Fishmarket Road, Rye, East Sussex TN31 7LR (tel. 01797 225229).

Bookshop distribution: Central Books, 99 Wallis Rd., London E9 5LN (tel. 0181 986 4854).

Funded by THE ARTS COUNCIL OF ENGLAND

Interface Art and Non-Fiction Poll Results, 1995

Last month, we gave the *Interzone* story-poll results for 1995. Just to remind you, in the January 1996 issue we also asked readers to vote on their favourite (and least favourite) cover paintings, internal illustrations and non-fiction features published in the magazine from issues 91 to 102 inclusive. Sixty-five ballots were received by the March deadline, a quite sufficient number to give a valid result (thanks to everyone who participated!). As usual, we subtracted all negative mentions from positive ones to arrive at the following scores. In these categories we list only those who scored two or more points (a few – very few, I'm glad to say – scored negatively).

Artists – Covers:

1)	**SMS** (#100)	21
2)	**Maurizio Manzieri** (#99)	17
3)	**Santos Garijo** (#96)	13
4)	**Santos Garijo** (#98)	11
5)	**SMS** (#92)	10
6=)	**Bob Eggleton** (#101)	8
6=)	**SMS** (#91)	8
8)	**SMS** (#95)	6
9)	**Maurizio Manzieri** (#102)	5
10)	**Alex Ostroy** (#94)	4
11)	**David A. Hardy** (#93)	2

Artists – Interiors:

1)	**SMS**	29
2)	**Gerry Grace**	15
3)	**Jim Burns**	11
4)	**Alex Ostroy**	9
5)	**Russell Morgan**	6
6)	**Giuseppe Lipari**	4
7)	**Maritza Soto**	3
8)	**Andi Jones**	2

Non-Fiction

1)	**David Langford:** Ansible Link	23
2)	**Book reviews** in general	19
3)	**Nick Lowe:** Mutant Popcorn	13
4)	**Interaction** (readers' letters)	11
5=)	**Christopher Evans:** On the Receiving End	10
5=)	**Brian Stableford:** essays in general	10
7=)	**John Brunner** interview (Melia)	9
8=)	**Lois McMaster Bujold** interview (Counihan)	8
8=)	**Christopher Priest** interview (Roche)	8
8=)	**SMS** interview (Robertson/Hurst)	8
11=)	**Interface** (editorials)	7
12=)	**John Clute:** book reviews	6
12=)	**Brian Stableford** on Philip K. Dick	6
14=)	**Thomas M. Disch:** essay-reviews	5
14=)	**Charles Platt:** The Tenacity of Fiction	5
14=)	**David Pringle:** Imaginary People	5
14=)	**Brian Stableford** on Theodore Sturgeon	5
17=)	**Gregory Benford** interview (Forshaw)	4
17=)	**Algis Budrys** interview (Melia)	4
17=)	**David Garnett** interview (Nicholls)	4
17=)	**Anne Gay** interview (Melia)	4
17=)	**Chris Gilmore:** book reviews	4
17=)	**Paul J. McAuley** interview (Lovegrove)	4
17=)	**Brian Stableford** on David H. Keller	4
17=)	**Tad Williams/Moorcock** interview (Nicholls)	4
26=)	**Gary Dalkin:** TV reviews	3
26=)	**Interviews** in general	3
28=)	**Paul Beardsley:** magazine reviews	2
28=)	**Jane Killick:** TV review	2

Heartiest congratulations to convincing poll-toppers **SMS** (for both exterior and interior art) and **David Langford** (for non-fiction – yet again: it's becoming a habit). And that's it for another year.

David Pringle

Interaction

Dear Editors:
Richard Evans, Publishing Director of Victor Gollancz's science-fiction, fantasy and horror line, died suddenly from pneumonia on 26th May 1996. Those of us who worked with him are stunned and saddened. In an age of glistening *product*, Richard Evans was an editor who gave a mother of a damn about words on a page. Books *mattered*. His editorial comments were few but always right; I re-plotted the book I'm working on because of an off-hand comment he made at Worldcon in Glasgow about teaching grandmothers to suck eggs, because I knew it would be right. He was committed to publishing the New Generation British writers (and the Old Generation too), and to that unfashionable genre, literary sf. He would take risks for what he saw as literary merit: David Garnett's new *New Worlds*; giving me the break into hardback...

I began reading sf in the days when what the yellow Gollancz spine in the library meant was the sign of real sf. Neither of us made any money; he must have fought a tough corner against the men in suits. The times I met him (usually as a victim of a publisher's lunch) he was witty and relaxed company, and had an unnervingly mild manner that worked wonders with sluggardly authors ("Ian, I'm getting a little worried about this book"). He beat off a truly ghastly illness a year and a half ago, and though he looked a little drawn at Worldcon he seemed to have recovered his former energy and enthusiasm for work. Now he's gone, and we aren't ready for it, and a light has gone dark in British sf.

Ian McDonald
Belfast

Dear Editors:
I am always deeply suspicious when I see an author writing in to defend his Magnum Opus from the dastardly attacks of Malicious Critics. It often smacks of petulance. If you write a book it goes out into the world and stands or falls on its own merits, or so I had always thought. Railing against the perceived injustices of a critic's review is like writing to your local MP. It may help you feel a little better, but it does no earthly good, and can make you appear faintly ridiculous.

Having said this, I'm about to join the ranks of the petulant and write in about Paul Brazier's review of my novel *Hawkwood's Voyage* in *Interzone* 108. This review really flummoxed me, because it seemed to be less about my book than about the iniquities and inadequacies of the fantasy serial novel. Brazier makes it very clear that he disapproves of the phenomenon, and is at pains to underline his own prejudices before he goes on to lambast *Hawkwood's Voyage*. Strangely enough, though, his complaints engendered not a feeling of defensive wrath, but more a baffled puzzlement.

For instance, he protests that the novel's title is misleading because very little of the book is actually about the voyage. About a third of the novel is set at sea, true, but I can't help thinking "so what?" Since when does a book's title have to be a 100% reflection of its content? Sorry, Paul; I just can't get my head round that one. Secondly, he moans that the Hawkwood in the book has nothing to do with the real-life Hawkwood who once existed, and whom I have apparently claimed to know nothing about. I'd be interested to know when I said this, as I've never met Paul, and I don't recall ever having made such a remark. The real John Hawkwood was a 14th-century condottierre who made his fortune in Italy leading the renowned "White Company" of English mercenaries. There was also a John Hawkins, who was a redoubtable Elizabethan sea-dog and a cousin to Sir Francis Drake. The fictional Hawkwood owes more to him than anyone else. Despite writing serial fantasy novels, I do know these things. It's called *research*.

Again, why should the fact that I used a real-life figure's name mean that I should in effect have to write a historical novel? Yes, *Hawkwood's Voyage* is inspired by 16th-century European history, but so what? I don't hear anyone complaining to Guy Gavriel Kay about *The Lions of Al Rassan* just because it's inspired by late-medieval Spain.

I think Paul's main problem is that I didn't write the kind of book he normally likes to read. He is gracious enough to say that he likes my previous novels, and wishes I would he more "contemporary," as it's what I'm good at – a back-handed compliment if ever there was one. The thing that astonishes me is that at the end of the review he grudgingly admits that the book is not bad at all, and he is awaiting the sequel. And yet there is nothing about the meat of the book, the characterization, the actual bare bones of the writing and so on. Which I've always thought was a use-

ful thing to have in a review, but shucks, I'm only a writer.

Bad reviews are like good medicine. They taste like shit, but you know they're probably good for you. What I object to is a reviewer who comes to a book with his mind already made up. In this case, *Hawkwood's Voyage* was not allowed to stand or fall on its own merits, but had to bear the burden of Brazier's dislike for the genre it is a part of. When a critic reviews a book, I like to think that he or she approaches it with an open mind, and gives it its due, whether or not it represents something they dislike in the industry as a whole. Maybe I'm just naive.

And the map at the front was "badly drawn." Heck, and I did it myself. Took ages too...

Paul Kearney
Copenhagen

***Paul Brazier** replies:*
I am sorry Paul Kearney thought my review was a bad review; I thought it was a good review, exactly as I thought Hawkwood's Journey *was a good book, in that they both set up expectations which they then confound. May I point out a further peculiar parallel, in that Kearney (I hate using surnames, but what can I do when he has the same forename?) is flummoxed by my review exactly as I was flummoxed (a good word that, and well worth repeating – "flummoxed!") by his book – it didn't deliver what was expected by its reader. I can't speak for Kearney or his intentions, but I know what I intended to convey. It is my conceit as a critic (rather than reviewer) to use a review column to explore general issues that are illuminated by the books to hand. In this particular case, I found an opportunity to fulminate against the current publishing fad for serial fiction. Having roundly condemned serialism (i.e. displayed my prejudice) I then bracketed my review of Kearney's book with several recent examples (Dan Simmons, Peter F. Hamilton, Kim Stanley Robinson, and Gwyneth Jones) of serial writing that confound my confessed prejudice. In this august company, I then pointed out that Kearney "is a much better writer than I have made him sound" and that he, too, had engaged my interest so that I wanted to know what happened to the characters in spite of my prejudice. If placing his work on a par with four such diverse but excellent writers is a bad review, I have to wonder what kind of mindless fawning adulation Kearney would need before he would rate it a good review.*

So I'll express my opinion unadorned: Paul Kearney is a damn good writer who, in his first three books, explored an interesting new wrinkle in fantasy. His latest book is much more formulaic, and my prejudices led me to believe it would be inferior. The writing is not inferior. The subject matter is further away from my interest area than in his previous work. Despite my lack of interest in Kings and Popes and Soldiers of Fortune and the vast movement of armies (I much prefer damaged soldiers or half-insane prison guards and their marriage problems) I still found it absorbing and well-written. But the book is the first part of a serial, and many of the plot-threads are left dangling. I didn't like that at all.

Dear Editors:
I live in Ireland, and, apart from Bob Shaw and Joseph O'Neill, I don't know of any Irish science-fiction writers, either in the North or the Republic (although C. S. Lewis was born in Belfast). Could you tell me about Ireland's sf history? Do we have an H. G. Wells, or at least a Ray Bradbury? I know there's a lot of fantasy in Ireland, such as Lord Dunsany, and quite a lot of horror, in the shape of Bram Stoker and others, but there is no real science-fiction equivalent. Can you also tell me where I could get hold of Joseph O'Neill's books, since his *Land Under England* is not to be found in my local Waterstones' catalogue?
Eoin Philpott
Cork, Ireland

***Editor:** Perhaps our two previous letter-writers, Ian McDonald and Paul Kearney, should answer your questions, since both hail from Northern Ireland (although Kearney presently lives in Denmark). Apart from those two younger writers, the one big name of Northern Irish sf, now that the much-loved Bob Shaw has passed away, is James White – see the listing of his latest novel in this issue's "Books Received." Although comparatively undersung in the UK, Jim White is sufficiently well-regarded in the USA to be this year's Guest of Honour at the World SF Convention to be held in Los Angeles in late August. As for Joseph O'Neill's* Land Under England *(1935), and his other sf novel, the anti-Nazi* Day of Wrath *(1936), all I can recommend is that you keep haunting your second-hand bookshops: the former was last in print as a Penguin paperback in 1987, so it shouldn't be impossible to find. The history, or non-history, of "Irish sf" is reminiscent of that of "Scottish sf" (see my remarks in* Interzone *108, page 65). In Joseph O'Neill and J. Leslie Mitchell, Irish and Scottish sf had rather similar figures – politically-inspired 1930s left-wingers who produced a couple of sf novels apiece (plus some marginal fantasy). Both were talented, but neither was quite a rival to H. G. Wells or Olaf Stapledon. Nowadays, Scottish sf has Iain Banks and Irish sf has Ian McDonald – a pretty good match, some might think!*

Dear Editors:
A few comments about *Interzone* 108. Let me say how good it is to see an issue comprising four out of five new contributors – a wonderful idea, as of late I have been increasingly despondent at virtually every story being by someone already established in the *IZ* world. It was a pleasing experiment, and one which was in my opinion a success, the issue being no more "variable" than it usually is (don't read that negatively: diversity is essential).

Alastair Reynolds's "Spirey and the Queen": subtle and intricately plotted without being contrived; very good (I usually leave the first story until last, but this one was quite different). "Platonic Solid" by Phil Masters is a nice gentle story. Gary Couzens's "The Facilitator" is run-of-the-mill sf. Catherine Mintz's "The Stone Jungle": very human and dark and wonderful. And finally, "Moving Mysteriously" by Dominic Green is brilliant; very funny and *very* well written. I hope we shall see more of Mr Green's work in the near future.
D. S. Alexander
Little Dunham, King's Lynn, Norfolk

Dear Editors:
I enjoyed your special J. G. Ballard issue (number 106). It has inspired me to hunt out my copy of *The Drought* and to begin re-reading *The Terminal Beach* short-story collection. I am looking forward to the David Cronenberg film version of *Crash* and intend to see it regardless of the reviews it gets.
Billy Stewart
London

***Editor:** The film of Ballard's* Crash *was premiered at the Cannes Film Festival in late May 1996 and seems to have provoked a good deal of controversy. It is now scheduled for general release in the United States in October, although no British release date has been announced – and, indeed, there is some doubt as to whether it will be released to the cinema in Britain at all; it may go straight to video over here, if that is permitted by our censors. The Cannes jury, under the chairmanship of Francis Ford Coppola, thought highly enough of the film to give it their special Jury Award, for "daring, originality and audacity." A minority of the jury dissented vociferously, however, and there were boos and walk-outs during the screening. Obviously, this is a movie which will split audiences right down the middle. As a result, it bids fair to become some sort of "cult classic."*

Dear Editors:
I thought you would be interested in the enclosed news story from the *Washington Post* ["Firebrand Publisher Plans to Mass-Market Racist 'Turner Diaries,'" April 24, 1996]. Just as I predicted at the end of my piece on William Pierce's *The Turner Diaries* [in *Interzone* 103], there is no limit to the greed of publishers. Lyle Stuart of Barricade Books is bringing out a mass-market paperback edition of the novel, so that every teenager in America can share Tim McVeigh's neo-Nazi daydreams *[McVeigh is the alleged Oklahoma City bomber – Ed.]*. Sf writers have often scored prophetic points, but how often have sf critics done the same thing?
Thomas M. Disch
Barryville, New York

***Editor:** To remind readers, Pierce's* The Turner Diaries *is an sf novel (of the extreme "libertarian" sort), self-published in 1978 and sold, hitherto, by mail order. It has gained some circulation among far-right, fascist, gun-loving groups in the USA; and alleged terrorist bomber Timothy McVeigh is said to have sold copies to his acquaintances. The news item Tom Disch has sent us states that publisher Lyle Stuart is now planning the book's first above-ground edition, which will carry an introduction by the publisher describing the novel as "ignorant" and "full of hate." When asked if he was worried about Stuart's introduction, 62-year-old author Pierce commented: "I think we share one common interest – we'd like to see the book circulating as widely as possible. I assume he's not going to write anything that will hurt sales."*



Two hundred days and sleepless nights after we burned the children, I led a different kind of Chantway, a new kind of tale. Black space strung with silver stars like pearls, and hanging there, like a baleful eye, the scull-gate's golden frame. I could not show the tachyon split, not literally; instead, I caused a maelstrom of chaotic colours like the worst peyote nightmare to spill across the hogan's interior. And I showed Balance, an emerald planet which glowed with promise, and then...

Trembling, I cut the holoprojector. The hogan's interior remained dim, but green pre-dawn light streaked the patch of sky that hung above the smoke-hole at the ceiling's apex, casting a pale eldritch light across the proud faces of the elders of my clan. My maternal aunt, Josephine Begay, or Grey Woman, looked at me, and in the strange light her eyes were deep dark pits, seeing deep into my spirit and surely knowing me for the evil thing I was, or had become.

All night I had spoken, sometimes chanting, sometimes singing, but I had not revealed the worst of what we'd done, of what I had done, on the world we called Balance. I knew, suddenly, that this was not the place for expiation, for the restoration of harmony.

"That is all, I think." I spoke in English, now, as the trance-state left me. This wasn't the 20th century: most of the elders were as fluent in English as in Navajo.

In the shadows, Red Woman sighed. "That was a part-ceremony to end them all, my daughter."

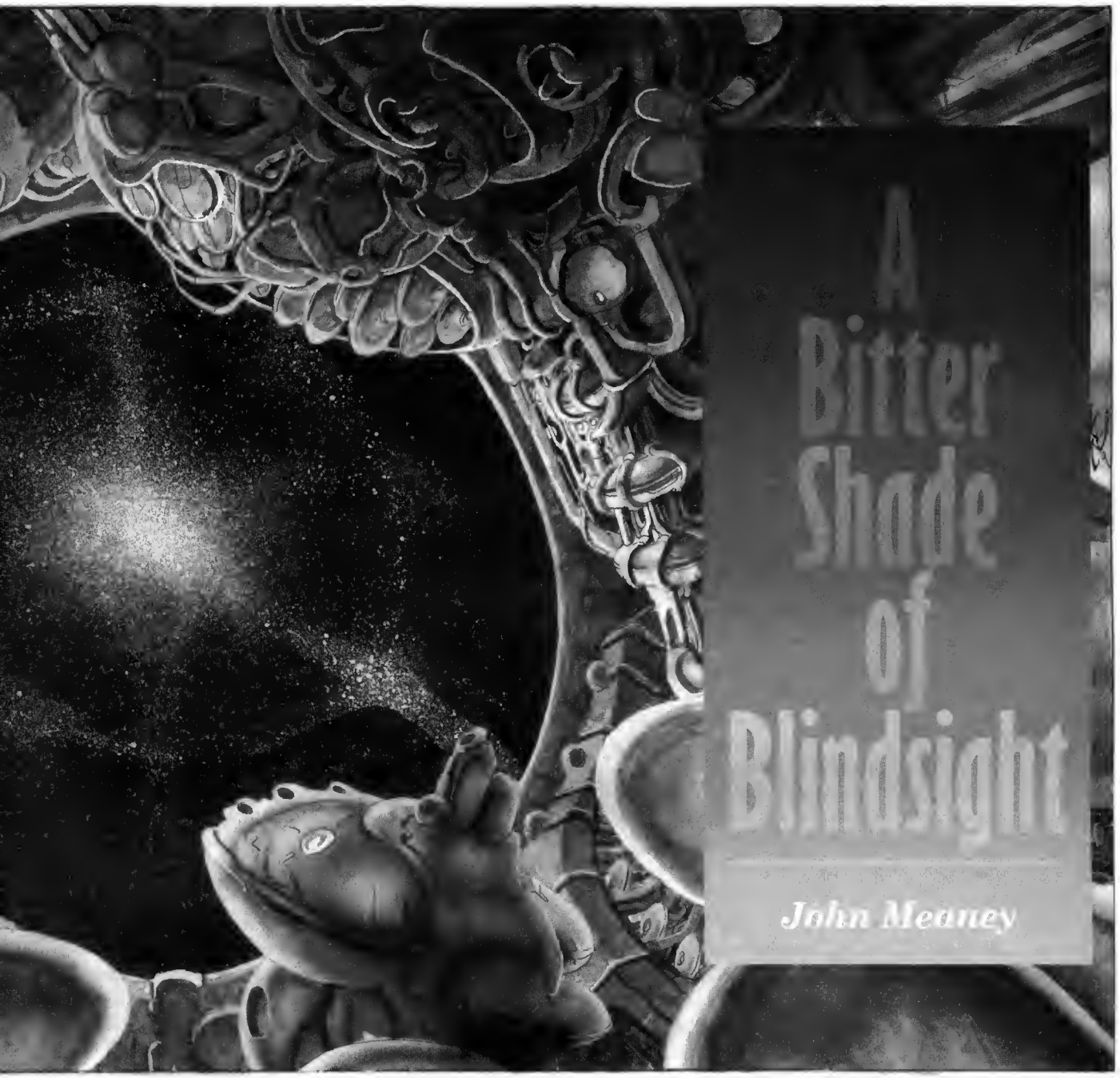
There were nods of agreement among the elders, and I accepted their verdict. I could not go on. There was more, far more, for me to tell them and, let's face it, it needed to be followed by a Ghostway, and that was a ceremony I surely could not survive.

A flap was thrown back from the doorway, and I squinted. Golden sun was creeping over the mesa's edge.

"You're finished, aren't you?" said my nephew, Dave. A straight-backed youth now, not the child I had known.

"We've finished," I said.

"Good. The cops are here." He nodded, and ducked



Illustrations by SMS

back outside the hogan.

I powered down the holoprojector and stuffed it into my backpack. I pushed the pack aside, and crawled out of the hogan on my hands and knees, and got stiffly to my feet. A small flyer was coming from the east, out of the dawn.

"Cops?" I asked.

"Tribal Police," said Dave. "I scanned 'em."

The flyer dipped down below an outcrop, stayed out of sight for a while, then rose up into view, and headed straight for us. I could make out the insignia on its blunt grey nose.

It dropped into a landing, a fast but not showy manoeuvre, kicking up a cloud of red dust. I pulled my bandanna up around my nose and mouth.

The cockpit liquefied and made a slight popping sound as the man crawled out through the membrane and jumped to the ground.

"Hi, Cly," said Dave.

"Hi. Howya doin'?"

His voice was deep. He had the narrow waist of the *Dine'é*, the people, and his wide shoulders strained the olive uniform of the Navajo Tribal Police. A heavy standard-issue blaster hung at his left hip. He shifted his belt's weight in what looked like a gesture of habit.

"Ma'am." He tipped his hat.

"Hi," I said, loosening my bandanna and letting it lay back around my neck. I liked his manners, at any rate.

Watch it, girl. Some kinds of trouble you don't need, right now.

"There's been a bit of an accident back there." He looked back at the outcrop. "A camel-drover called it in. Some, ah, Anglo guy."

"Poor *bilagáana*," I said easily. "Probably wandering round the desert without enough water."

The officer, Cly, looked at me sharply. Couldn't blame him. But I was only half Anglo, and he should have noticed that.

"Natalie's from around here," Dave said beside me. "Been away for years."

"Right." Cly nodded. "I was born for the turquoise

clan, of the tangle people. I've only been based here for a year or two."

All very friendly. I ran a hand through my hair.

"Nice to be back," I said.

"Uh-huh. You'd be the astronaut, would you?" asked Cly easily.

"Ah. Yeah. That's right."

I held my breath.

"The burned Anglo, you see," he said, and his eyes were watchful as his voice was soft, "was a SWSA employee. Investigative Branch."

"He... might have been keeping an eye out for me, like a bodyguard."

The South-West Space Agency does that, sometimes, looking after us. I wondered if I sounded convincing.

He nodded. He wasn't dictating notes, and if he had a recorder pin on his person then it wasn't showing the small blue light which regulations demanded. But I knew he wasn't missing anything, and wouldn't be forgetting anything either.

Damned IB. The gaps in Phoenix Seven Beta's logs were probably becoming apparent after long analysis, though I had performed a virtuoso job of altering them, video logs and all, on the long solitary voyage home. And there were other inconsistencies: the medical scan they had put me through in Houston would have revealed the scars of childbirth, a fact that was missing from the logs.

Oh, Ash, my dear dead son.

...And let's not think what the psych reports might have said about me.

"The village's microwards are standard, are they?" asked Cly.

I shrugged.

Dave said, "Sure. I bought them myself."

The elders were out of the hogan now, and Aunt Josephine came up behind Dave and put her hand on his shoulder. I noted with dismay that she was carrying my backpack in one hand, strong despite her years.

"*Yá'át'ééh abíní*," she said. "How you doin', Cly? What's this about an accident?"

"Looks like some real strange resonance effect," he said. "Guy with second-degree burns, found lying down by the perimeter. Old Kee found him and flew him to the burns unit at Phoenix MedCenter."

The was a hiss of sharply in-drawn breath from Dave. No one pointed out that I had set the microwards last night. But they were designed to warn us and frighten off wandering coyotes who strayed too near the animal pens, not burn anyone who crossed their field.

"Impossible," I said flatly.

"Forensic techs are on their way, but it looks like he was staking the place out and fell asleep in the microfield."

I said nothing. Perhaps an Anglo would have been drawn out by the silence, and maybe that was why Cly had spoken. But the half of me that was Navajo was content to watch and listen, undisturbed by silence.

Finally, Cly shrugged.

"I have to get over to Kayenta," he said. "Hey, that's a good pack. Mind if I look?"

"Ah – no," I said. What else could I say?

He crouched and ran his hand over the pack where Aunt Josephine had left it on the sand. He admired the solar panel and the in-built nav-system, the water-trap in its pouch. He was very good. If I hadn't been expecting it, I'd never have noticed him thumb on his scan-ring and pass it over the pack.

He straightened up, and my heart thumped like a hammer in my chest.

"Nice. You planning on hiking?"

Why wasn't he cuffing me and reminding me of my rights?

"Yeah," I said. "Or maybe going on horseback, up into the mountains."

"But you'll be around?"

"Oh, yes. I'll – see you again."

"I hope so."

He tipped his hat to me and the elders, and walked back to his flyer.

"Cly?" called out Aunt Josephine. "Why are you flying all the way to Kayenta?"

Ye gods, I thought. He's a police officer, and she's interrogating him.

"Covering for Charlie," he said, and I knew he meant Charlie Rivers, whom Aunt Josephine had known all her life. "Bad business in Flagstaff. He's gone to help out."

"Organizing rescue squads?"

"Yeah," said Cly. I must have looked puzzled, for he added, "Corp-wars. Micro-nuke at NihonTelCom offices. You'd think they'd learn."

He meant that ware viruses could be more effective. But not as demoralizing.

"It's chaos," he added. "Uncontrollable."

"Well actually–" I began.

"I know, chaos can be controlled. Small changes with big results can be used for short-term control. The butterfly effect. Stochastic resonance."

I looked at him. He looked big and tough and dumb. Two out of three ain't bad.

Ma'ii the coyote, the trickster. Chaos. Two views, one phenomenon: the condensation nucleus of my understanding, as a 14-year-old girl, which had coalesced my twin cultural heritages.

Aunt Josephine had known, or guessed, about the Flagstaff explosion even though she had spent the night with the rest of us in the hogan. And, no, I didn't think she was involved in any corp-wars herself. She'd always been fey that way.

"They've gotten much worse while you've been away," she said to me. "The corp-wars. Much worse."

"Yeah," I said. "So I gather."

"Welcome home," said Cly dryly.

I may even have managed to smile at him as he climbed back inside his flyer. He nodded as the cockpit hardened, and we all stepped back as his thrust jets kicked up another dust cloud and his flyer rose, span on the spot, and set off, heading north. The direction of evil, it is said.

Red Woman touched my shoulder and I jumped. She was holding out a cloth-covered bundle.

"Yours," she said. "I took it from your pack, inside."

She unwrapped the bundle and handed me my blaster butt-first.

"Thanks," I said, checking the power was off, and stuffed it into my belt.

"You're welcome."

As though at some unspoken signal, she and the others turned and went back inside the hogan, followed by Dave – though he winked at me before he ducked into the doorway. Only Aunt Josephine was left outside.

I unsealed my pack and reached in, felt the hard outline of the infocrystals. I didn't think anyone had taken them. I just wanted to be sure.

I resealed the pack and straightened up.

"Do you walk in *hózró*, my daughter?" she asked.

I exhaled, a long shaky breath. "No. Not much harmony in my life, any more."



"A pity. Still, it's good you can take care of yourself, alone in the desert." She indicated my belt.

I touched the blaster's butt. "Isn't it, just?"

"Do you plan on seeing her?"

I could have said, which *her* do you mean. But there was no point in hiding things from Aunt Josephine.

"I am *naakií*, the twin." Pointedly, I added the literal translation: "The one who is two."

"Something joyful," said Aunt Josephine, and her wise old face was burnished copper in the dawning sun. "Two of you, where before there was one."

"An abomination," I said. "She's alive, and I am her *ch'indii*."

Despite all her self-control, Aunt Josephine shivered. When a person dies her *ch'indii*, her evil spirit, is separated from her true self. If she is buried according to custom, with moccasins swapped to the wrong feet, then the *ch'indii* is confused and cannot follow the true person to the world below, but is trapped here in the world above, miserable and haunted, forever.

"*Ch'indii*," I said again.

"No," she said, but she took an involuntary step back. "You can't mean that."

"No, of course not."

I laughed then, to make light of things, and squeezed her shoulder with affection.

She stayed with me while the sun rose, painting gold across the sweeping purple and red of the mesa, beneath a flawless blue sky, and the heat became a physical oppressive presence, beating down upon us; and I suppose I should thank Aunt Josephine for that, for staying with me, but the part of me that is bitter says no, it was from loyalty not to me, but to my other, my doppelganger, my nemesis, to the one who stole my life, the one with whom there would have to be a reckoning.

I piloted Aunt Josephine's old battered skimmer a metre above the ground. To my right, the stippled layers of green and black and white of a scarp slope marked the edge of the Painted Desert. Sighing, I took the wheezy old skimmer into a soft landing by the slope's edge, tucked behind an outcrop that would provide a little shade later, as the sun began to go down.

For a moment, a rattle behind the dashboard made me fear for the air-conditioning, but I raised my knee – supple as ever, thankfully – and gave a thumping kick with my heel. The rattle stopped. I breathed in cool scrubbed air.

I wondered where Aunt Josephine's loyalties truly lay, and where the powers of the Investigative Branch ran out. Neither of them could stop me from reaching her, my enemy and progenitrix – but Aunt Josephine, at least, knew that I was carrying a weapon through a Disarmed Zone.

The IB had no search and seizure powers, but they could keep an eye out on TrafficNet, and if they were really bright, they might choose to check whether the occupant of Aunt Josephine's flyer was the owner.

I pulled the blaster out of my waistband – damn, it hurt where it had dug into me – and laid it on the seat beside me. Then I polarized the cockpit to darkness, and settled back to sleep.

And dreamed...

...Of a golden eye hanging in space, Io in the background. Beside me, in the small control room – small compared to the vast hold and biome and fuel tanks behind the rear bulkhead – Mai-Li runs through the system checks yet again, delicate hands fluttering like butterflies through the holo-displays with a speed and elegance of control gestures beyond anything I have ever seen, while Robert scans breakpoints and traces and compares results. I, in nominal and rather temporary command, have the go/no-go decision, and so time on my hands to brood while the golden opening in space grows ever larger.

This is my first interstellar. Phoenix One has flown five times before, with five different crews. Did they all feel like this, when the scull-gate drew near?

Soon, it fills the viewscreen. The pulsing diaphanous rainbow hues of the displays, the figures and text scrolling through the air, the musical hum of auditory output and commands, all fade as the moment approaches. Small and red, blinking down at the bottom right corner of my vision, the name of the ship hangs in the air before me.

Phoenix One.

Tiny itching sensation, back of left hand. An ant, a fugitive from our in-ship biome behind me, crawling over me. I hate insects. Very un-Navajo, I raise my right hand to crush it out of existence –

"Don't." Mai-Li's soft voice.

She's right. Ignore. Decision point approaching. The golden rim of the scull-gate grows beyond the edge of my vision as we get close. Now.

"Go," I say.

A tearing golden light rips us apart and our scullied particles split, riven in two, and I pray with all my might, to the Old Testament Yahweh of my father's

race as to the Holy People of my mother's tribe, and the golden lights seem to last forever, and then they go out.

Cool black. Normal space. Before me hangs Io. The small red ID still reads "Phoenix One."

"We're okay," Mai-Li laughs, a silvery, tinkling sound.

I crush the ant as it crawls onto my armrest. Mai-Li, overcome with relief, says nothing. Then we begin the fall to Io, adjusting our approach for the swing-round that will kick us back towards home, towards Earth, where our friends and families, our familiar homes, are waiting...

I woke in darkness, shivering, and a bitter silent laugh sounded in my mind. Cramps shot through me as I shifted in the seat. Damn Aunt Josephine. Why did she have to buy such a small flyer? Hardly the place for sleeping.

...And the real memory came, then, not the wishful dream, and for a moment I remembered the Phoenix's control room so deeply I felt I was aboard again, felt the cool smoothness of my command chair's upholstery, the subtle polished smell, the familiar humming and chatter, the underlying deeper vibration of the drive, and Mai-Li and Robert...

...The golden light burns brightly for an eternity, and then it is gone.

Black, cold space.

For a moment, the red ID still shows "Phoenix One," and my mind plays a trick, tells me Io is still there, or that we've swung around and it's out of sight.

There's a kind of whimpering sound from Mai-Li, and her soft face is etched with fear.

The red characters crawl, and the ID rearranges itself.

Phoenix Seven.

"Oh my God," says Robert.

"Looks like we're it, kiddies," I say, but I feel something cold clutch at me as I say it.

"They did it." Mai-Li. "They really did it."

They. Already, they are behind us, though they are in fact ourselves. We're the scullied partner, tachyon duplicates dropping back to normal reality a precisely calibrated – I hope – number of light-centuries away from Earth.

There's a distant blue flash, unexpected, and a video volume expands to analyse the anomalous radiation, and just for a moment there is an awful twisting of perspective, an emerald globe somehow pulled apart and curved in a way beyond imagination.

Twisted...

And then Robert's fighting to recalibrate nav, and the geodesic, pulled to tatters by a strange attractor, rearranges itself as a steady curve in a phase-space display, and we're back to normal, I guess. The small video volume shows a green world, an Earth-type world, and space-time is back to rights.

"Things got a little ... out of balance," I say, for the log's benefit, "but we're fine."

"There's our balance," says Mai-Li, gesturing at the display, and inadvertently names our home, the resplendent green world where we shall dwell forever.

The half-forgotten ant is crawling across my armrest. I encourage him to climb onto my finger, then gently let him down onto the console.

"I guess," I say, "We're all in this together."

The ant stops, antennae waving, below the green globe's image hanging in the air, a vast new world. Home.

Children screaming as they fell, no, that wasn't right, they fell silently, grim and pale-faced towards the flowing, glowing lava and burned up without a sound...

I wrenched myself back to wakefulness, breathing hard. In the skimmer, yes, that's where I was, and the crick in my neck was the result of sleeping in this damned seat.

I depolarized the cockpit. Clear, it held the night sky, deepest black, and a profusion of stars sprinkled across those infinite reaches. Childhood nights, sneaking out to watch the stars, grinning with delight when an asteroid shower sprayed briefly across the night.

I wasn't going to sleep any more this night. I pulled my seat into an upright position, gunned the skimmer's engine – startling thunder in the desert night – and lifted off, tuning the cockpit to IR as I did so: a film of smartatom scintillators now in an enabled state. The desert was painted in ghostly blues and pinks.

I let the skimmer resume its original course, the one I had laid in yesterday, while I accessed info and requested a terrain map and *her* address. The two intelligent facets interfaced, and the holoprojector drew me a floating miniature desert in the bright Martian reds of daylight, and amber trace-lines marked sensible routes to the flashing terminus point atop a low mesa: her house, new from my day. I wondered what it looked like, how she had furnished it.

If I had a home on Earth to call my own, I suppose I'd fill it with infocrystals, a hi-res proj, and exercise equipment. But what do I know?

I killed the display and altered course for Kayenta.

Pure impulse. The image of Cly, the policeman, arose in my mind's eye, and my heart beat a little faster. Was he the reason for my change in course? I didn't know. But I took a long sweeping curve across the featureless desert and powered on towards the town.

It was just before dawn when I landed on the outskirts. From the long-range viewer, it hadn't changed much: the long sweeping dome and arches of the hotel, the small string of stores, the small prefab domes of the locals. Not hovels, but smaller and meaner homes than the Anglos in the cities.

But they had *hózró*, some of them – the ones who weren't drunks or addicts, and that was most of them – and that sense of walking in harmony, of following the Navajo way, was part of what I'd lost.

And no damned corp-war was likely to spread out this far, either.

An unmanned freight skimmer passed by a metre above the ground, following the line of the old Highway 160, like a giant blind trilobite gliding almost silently through the air. Soon, it was out of sight.

I climbed out of the skimmer and limbered up. Then I began to run along the old cracked highway, heading into the dawn. As the potholes became worse, I moved out onto the sand, running steadily, veering

off to one side whenever I neared a straggly mesquite bush which might shelter a rattlesnake at its base. I ran for half an hour, revelling in the ease with which I breathed, since SWSA medics cured my smoke-damaged lungs on my return with miraculous femtotech, and turned around, and ran back towards the flyer with the warmth of the rising sun soaking into my back. Back at the flyer I stretched – easy when the ground is radiating warmth into your muscles, something I had missed in our region of Balance, though you didn't have to keep an eye out for scorpions there – and I worked my abs with 200 sit-ups below a disconcerting sapphire sky, and finished with lunges and biceps and triceps curls with two small handy rocks I picked up.

Breathing heavily, I got back into the cockpit and retrieved a tube of smartgel from my pack, and slapped a handful of it onto my face. It left a cool minty tang where it slithered across my skin, and by the time I picked up the used puddle from the floor into my filter bowl, my skin felt clean and scrubbed all over, and my clothes smelled fresh as new. At least they'd let me in the hotel restaurant now.

I ignored my thirst – no good wasting the flyer's limited supply – until I got to the hotel. The restaurant was at the back, low and long and cool and dark. Ignoring the self-serve system, I slipped into a booth and waited for the waitress, a plump young Navajo girl, to take my order.

I reeled off the list of things I wanted to eat. "The works," I said. "And a pitcher of water, please. No, make that iced tea. Thanks."

"You're welcome," she said politely.

She checked on the other booths on her way through to the kitchen. Three tables were occupied, a couple of burly local guys complaining about the boss who worked them so hard, and –

My skin crawled. Those IB agents were good, very good. I'd been sure that no one was tagging me, but one of them was here, slim and cold-looking, carefully not meeting my gaze while his pale eyes watched everything in sight. His movements, as he cut his breakfast steak, were controlled and precise.

I was light-headed, but that was partly low blood glucose, so I stayed and waited for breakfast to arrive, and pretended I hadn't noticed him.

How had they known I was coming? Extrapolated from my last course change, and sped here? But there hadn't been any high-performance flyers out in the parking lot and besides, in Navajo territory you need a Navajo licence to fly anywhere but over the old highway routes. The parking lot had held one battered old pickup and a small black dart of a skimmer. Not professionally unobtrusive.

Something very wrong here, but I loaded eggs and pancakes into my system, replenishing lost electrolytes and sugar. Not overeating: I'd been scrawny for years, and planned to stay that way.

Someone turned on the hv, and images sprang up at half a dozen points in the room. I'd forgotten how hooked on media input some people could be.

I listened absently to the news while I finished off breakfast and ran my cred-ring over the table's sensor



pad, thumbing the ring twice for a generous tip.

A muffled crump from each display, and I realized they were showing the explosions at Flagstaff, and I saw the man's eyes shift, then, and it came to me that he was not what I had thought, not an IB agent after all.

I left the restaurant slowly, walking out into the white sunlight with my eyes squinted almost shut. Damn, my eye-drops were back in Aunt Josephine's skimmer. Along with my blaster.

I jogged slowly across the old crossroads to a low one-storied building that housed the local emergency services. Inside, the entire complement of the Tribal Police comprised Cly, leaning back in a chair, dusty boots up on his desk, with a phase-space holo pulsing in the air before him, and, from my viewpoint, mirror-image text which he waved away into oblivion as he dropped his feet to the floor.

"*Yá'at'ééh*," he said.

"One of the Flagstaff bombers is over in the hotel," I said. "Pale skin, dead grey eyes. You'll spot him. If you move quick, you'll get him before he finishes breakfast."

"What?" he asked, but he was already on his feet and moving. "How do you know it's one of them?"

That floored me. A strange tingling on my skin, a sick feeling in my stomach.

"I just know it."

"Like a witch, you mean?" he asked, cynicism and belief evenly balanced in his voice. "Is this a habit, with you?"

I let out a long shaky breath. "On Balance," I said, "these things happened all the time. That's the way things were."

But I've brought it here, the sickness. Oh, ye gods. And had I, somehow, subconsciously, known how to arrange the microwards so that a surveilling IB agent would get second-degree burns?

"I can't arrest him because of your... feelings," he said, but there was a half-questioning look in his dark eyes.

"As he gets in the vehicle," I said, "You might spot the... other device. The second one, the one that's with him. I'm not sure..."

He picked up his hat and jammed it on his head, checked his blaster's status light with a glance, and looked at me, hard.

"Stay – no, wait in there." He pointed to an office with an opaque door. "I don't want him to see you. Don't go anywhere."

I nodded weakly.

"I won't," I said.

"Good."

He left the office with a loping, easy stride, like a wolf. I wouldn't want him for an enemy, I was sure of that.

I waited till I heard thumping and cursing from the cell next door, till I was certain that Cly had caught the man – a racist imprecation was cut off by the wet smacking sound of a fist, and I winced – then I slipped out of the office door, quietly, boot soles tuned to maximum softness, walking past an Anglo slumped in his chair, so busy reading the tiny floating holo pages before him – the Bible, I think – he never even saw me leave.

There are ways of leaving false trails on TrafficNet scans, and when I got back to the skimmer I set about swapping codes with another vehicle. Compared to jinxing the Phoenix's logs, this was a piece of cake. I was the one who had, after all, rewritten the history of an entire world.

I worked furiously, hacking code, until it was done. Then I waited till a vehicle passed the Kayenta town sign with its sensor loop, and tight-beamed the transponder codes with my little switch programme. It would only last a few minutes, ten at most, till the system polled all vehicles again and corrected its error, but in the meantime I could leave town and Cly's display would show I was I heading east.

I powered up the skimmer and headed west over the old highway, constrained to that route for a while since TrafficNet temporarily thought I was someone else from out of state. Finally, no longer busy in the moment, I had time to think.

About doing things and not knowing the reason why, the way we learned to do things on Balance...

Beneath a grey and lavender cloudy sky, air filled with the electric scents of Hope, our little settlement on the face of Balance, on a dark tilled field, the settlement domes a kilometre away and beyond, like a sculpture of an eagle, the proud white dart-shaped Phoenix Seven standing in the lee of a smoky blue ridge, trim now, for the huge bulky tanks that had comprised 90 percent of the starship's bulk were now the three big domes, the Terran-ecology biodomes, which form the triune centrepiece of the settlement. I shiver as the cold wind brings tears to my eyes, and return my attention to what I'm supposed to be doing.

I'm crouching in the rich loamy soil, and Claire, our best gaiologist, is a few metres away doing the same as me: pushing the spike end of the dull grey containers loaded with bacteria deep into the soil, then activating the feed. Pulsing blue surfaces and twisting red lines grow in the air above the small grey canisters: holo-displays mapping our success, with luck.

"You think this is going to work?" I ask.

"Don't know," says Claire dryly. "You're in charge. Aren't you supposed to encourage me?"

"Ha. Ha."

Claire grins. After Robert, Mai-Li and I landed the Phoenix and let the rear pods unfold like a flower's petals, we had some problems with the biodomes and, rather than play it safe, we decanted the entire complement of 50 colonists immediately. Everyone woke up okay, not a single sleep-tank failure, and that gave us all the expertise we needed, but 50 extra mouths to feed. The gamble paid off, and we three flight crew were voted Burghers of Hope, though there were some similar-sounding alternative designations.

Red traces tumbling, blue attractors turning strange: Claire's fingers flickered as she adjusted flow rates.

"If they're too tightly coupled, the species," I say, "they'll never evolve to a significant optimum."

"My God!" She smacks her forehead. "Why didn't I think of that?"

"And then you hold the egg like this," I say, miming what I mean, "and suck just so, grandma."

It's fascinating, though, the way every software-evolution strategy an old coder like me can come up with, some gaiologist has discovered its stratagem rules already, a decade before, just waiting to be used.

"They're doing all right." She points to scrolling figures, the scanned population of our little microbes, and it looks as though they're settling into their new home.

The sky above sparkles silver as if in celebration, though it's just some transient event in the smartatom film high above, where it surrounds the colony and reforms the atmosphere to suit us, the newcomers to this world. The barrier's femtotech is rare and expensive enough on Earth; here on Balance, it's both precious and irreplaceable.

Claire sits back on her heels and runs a hand through her long sweat-darkened hair.

"I've got something to tell you," she says.

"Well," I say, grinning, "I hope you've told Todd first."

She smiles, colour rising to her cheeks. "Is it that obvious?"

I give her a hug, and kiss her warm cheek. "You're pretty damned radiant."

"Thanks. Am I the third, or the fourth?"

"Don't know," I say. "Tamarin, you mean?"

"Yeah. I think she is. But I don't think it's Steve's."

"Ah, right." I think about that for a moment, sifting through possible candidates, then leave it aside for now. "So who's going to pop out the first new Hoper? Place your bets puh-leez, ladies and gentlemen..."

"Don't." She places her hand across her still-flat abdomen. "I just know it's going to happen the way it should."

"Good. That's what I think, too."

We check the displays once more, then head back towards home. By unspoken agreement, we both take the low ridge trail that swings round the back of the settlement.

"Hi!"

A cheery wave. A small group, half a dozen of our colleagues, back from their various assignments, all happily heading back the same way at just the same time.

I nod towards Frank, tall and taciturn, and feel something tumble over inside me. God, am I getting broody?

Laughing and arguing, we walk down the grassy path past the Dumbbell, two physics-lab domes linked by a long steel and glass corridor housing a linear scullifier, just as pale blue flame flashes and there's the thump of an explosion and the shattering of glass. Black noxious smoke pours out of the destroyed panels.

"Peter's in there," says someone.

Two of the guys are already standing by glass wall, to one side of the billowing black cloud, and as they link their hands to form a stirrup I take a running jump, and they boost me up onto the corridor's glass roof, mercifully intact but burning hot.

I thump at an emergency handle and a triangular pane falls in.

Peter's partly blackened face looks up at me from amid a tangle of wrecked lab gear, and he jumps to meet my hand and I help haul him up though it's mostly his own effort. Then we're standing on the roof, ready to jump, and the rest of the gang are holding out a canvas sheet and I shove Peter forward so he jumps first and the canvas breaks his fall.

They struggle to roll him off to get the canvas ready for me but the wind shifts then, and acrid fumes blow into my face and, out of breath, I suck them into my lungs with an involuntary wheeze and tears blind my eyes but I see a flash of white light, that awful twisting sight, the second time that I've see it now, that strange feel of things bent out of their natural geometry and a sense almost of distant laughter and then the blackness comes and the vertiginous feeling of falling, endless falling, and no one there to catch me...

Another memory fragment...

An unseen vision, greater far
Than optic might: yes, on a par
With dream-borne sight –
While in the chasm, deeper far
Than darkest death, black demons spar –
But we forget.

Coughing, I summon a nurse to my bedside, and point out this piece of doggerel which is in my bedside terminal's workspace. In answer, he uses his staff access to show the bed's previous occupant, I gather, sitting before another holo display, and someone out of view asks him to say something whenever a bird appears. The young man is pale, with blonde hair falling across his forehead. He doesn't look stupid, but he says nothing when one bird after another appears in the lower half of his field of vision. Only when an image flies overhead does he say he can see it.

"That's Paul," says my nurse. "Brain damage. Visual cortex."

The video log's still running, though. As random blue swallows fly through the video volume, appearing from his lower left or right, Paul is asked to raise his left or right forefinger, depending on where the bird appears, and he gets it right almost every time.

"But he can't see it," I say.

"The conscious part of him can't," says my nurse. "Or couldn't. Want to see him now?"

It's time for my exercise anyway. The nurse escorts me down the long white corridors of Houston's FemtoMed Center, out onto a sun-drenched lawn, and I recognize the pale man sitting in a sun-lounger, and that blonde lock of hair is still over his eyes.

"Hi," I say. "My name's Nat. Natalie Silverthorn."

He nods. "I'd get up, but I'm not supposed to move about too much, till the interface is integrated. You a patient? "

"Yeah. I've seen some of your poetry."

"Oh, that." He looks out across the lawn, at the other resting patients, and his grey eyes are calm. "That was just depression."

"Oh."

"I'm going to be okay, though."

A buzzer sounds, then, and the medics begin to round up patients like sheep and herd them back indoors, and I follow along meekly.

These femto-med techs are fine people, and if they rework my lungs I'll be properly grateful. But if they touch my mind, I'll kill them.

Another day spent in fitful sleep in the skimmer, its cock-

pit polarized to black. I powered up the hv and accessed a passive-drama channel. The default choice was *Bridget Goes to Mars*, an old serial I last saw long before I went into space, and I chose it in a fit of nostalgia.

Ten minutes into an episode called *Sisters Simulacra*, I shut it down. The plot resolution depended on not guessing from the start that this week's doomed heroine was a VR construct. "...And they took their helmets off, and it had all been a simulation." When I was at school, old Agnes Arrowsmith would have taken the strap to me if I'd turned in a story which ended like that. I wondered what had become of her.

I depolarized the cockpit. Looking at the desert through gritty eyes, I felt insubstantial as a coded construct myself, some programmer's reified twisted dream.

Time to act.

I checked the pre-programmed course I'd laid in, and it was fine. Awkwardly, I pulled my backpack over from behind my seat, and degaussed one of its handy pockets. I ejected the slim comms module from the dashboard and slipped it into the pocket, and sealed the pocket shut. Then I removed my blaster from the dashboard's power feed and checked it: fully charged. I liquefied the cockpit membrane and scrambled out, blaster in one hand, dragging the pack behind me. I dropped it onto the rocky ground, and jumped down after it.

I sprang up, quickly sighting my blaster on a small boulder, and pressed the stud. I ducked back down as the boulder exploded, but something hit my cheek. Fragments of rock rattled against the skimmer's body, and I laughed.

My cheek felt warm. I touched it, and my hand came away red with blood. A tiny cut, insignificant.

I dragged my pack a few metres away then returned to the skimmer. I climbed up and reached inside, activated the drive, and jumped back down as the engines powered up. I backed away quickly as the skimmer rose, turned on the spot, and headed east towards a distant mesa.

I made sure my blaster was deactivated before I tucked it away inside my pack. Then I shrugged the pack up onto my back, sealed the strap across my front, and bounced a little to settle the weight evenly. Perfect.

Heat rose from the desert floor, pressed down at me from the endless blue sky, from the white searing sun, as I set off to find the one who had stolen my life from me.

Night. Clear desert night. I stopped for a rest, still standing, and looked up at the silver stars.

Phoenixes Two through Six were out there, somewhere, on distant worlds if they'd survived at all. Two sent return missions; one from a lush planet to which SWSA were planning more colonization trips. Perhaps the others were merely delaying their triumphal returns.

Of the four Space Agencies with Phoenix-type ships and scull-gate tech, Phoenix has the highest success rate. God help those other crews.

Day. Searing sun. Step after monotonous step, while the heat burned, my memory drifted free...

Frank was gentle with me, and always considerate of my low stamina and my smoke-scarred lungs, and he never minded if I had an inopportune coughing, wheezing fit at some intimate moment. He didn't stay with me for the birth, though, and I never worked out whether he had timed his long rock-hunting field-trip deliberately to avoid the event.

I pulled the pack's sip tube round to my mouth, and sucked water sparingly. There's a non-linear equation governing the relationship between sweat lost and the effort required to bear a given weight of water, and I hoped I'd got the balance right.

Balance.

After Ash was born, Frank was around even less. He had a new colleague in Peter, whom I – or rather, whom the entire community acting in unconscious unison – had rescued from the lab explosion. Peter had sworn off research in decompactifying the hidden six dimensions of our ten-dimensional universe, declaring that those twists beyond our perception obviously didn't want humans blundering around in their domain, not here on Balance anyway, and that the whole idea was way too dangerous. I was relieved, for I'd always feared he would one day raid Phoenix Seven's remaining hold for the one jump-gate we had and cannibalize it for its scullifier module.

Frank and Peter spent ever longer away together in the cold blue and violet mountains to the south, or in insulated tents down by the flowing rivers of molten lava in the smoking peaks to the north – Frank, whose parents had been killed in Seattle during the Mount Rainier eruption, was an authority on vulcanism – and I was content to raise Ash for the most part by myself. I called him *Ashkiidlohí*, Laughing Boy, as his childhood Navajo name, for though he was a frail and sickly child, he always found joy in the world around him. He wore a microdoc strapped to his arm constantly, never complaining, even when he was too young to understand that it kept him alive, scavenging his system of the LXDS virus's by-products, keeping the symptoms at bay but lacking the femtotech, even nanotech, which would have hunted down the viral molecules and broken them apart.

Ash, my son.

I never thought of what his adult name might someday be. Perhaps I knew, even then, as was the way of things on Balance, that he would never have need of one...

I stumbled, cursing, kicking a rock, and a small black scorpion scuttled out of sight.

"I wouldn't have killed you, little one," I murmured, though in my youth I would have stamped it into oblivion, not the Navajo way at all.

Only people can commit evil, and therefore deserve to suffer, to die.

Not children, though, not like Ash, robbed of his future more cruelly than I was robbed of mine...

Claire, standing at the doorway to my kitchen, shoos her son Jason outside to play. The sounds of children's chanting of some playtime rhyme drift through the open exterior door. I don't need to look out the window

to know that Ash is standing off to one side, laughing as the other, fitter, children play skipping games through ribbons of holo light, but not joining in with them, not ever joining in.

I hand Claire a cup of coffee.

"Thanks," she says. "Sorry about Frank."

He and Paul, who spend so much time together when they're off on field trips, have decided to make the arrangement permanent. If I hadn't cried, I'd have laughed.

"I know," I say, and it's true that I know how she feels at that moment, and that her sympathy is genuine. Yet it wasn't a surprise about Frank: as with most relationships here, it's as though we all understand each other.

Claire and I both gasp, sharing a sudden sensation like a clenched hand inside our guts, and we realise the sing-song rhyme outside has stopped, and then we're both running out to the yard and I bump into Claire's back as she stops and I forget about her because that's Ash lying down there, Ash with his face pale, ashen, yes, eyes closed and lying on the ground with his hands crossed on his chest and the other children are sitting in a tight circle around him, close to him, and they reach forward and I try to scream, do something, but a pale yellow glimmer accompanies that unnatural twisting I have seen before and the children reach inside Ash's chest, actually inside *him, somehow, and I see their hands are moving though I don't know how they're doing it but that's my son and they're killing him and the thought frees me and I'm running forwards and Claire's with me, screaming too, and we pull them off, pull them away from Ash and their hands are glistening but there's no blood, no blood at all, and I'd like to believe it's an hallucination but not this time, this time I know it's real and Claire knows it too, looking at her son Jason in horror but the children's faces are blank, not even annoyed, and I kneel by Ash and feel for a pulse at his neck but I already know there's none.*

Other colonists run up too, in that way we have of drawing together when danger threatens one of us, that way we've never even questioned, let's be honest, as the manner in which we talk and the way we act has changed since we arrived on Balance, and we've pretended somehow that it hasn't, but all illusions have been stripped away now and there's no going back to reclaim our innocence.

I have plenty of helpers to rush with Ash's limp white form to the medical dome and he's on the emergency table in seconds and sensor arms swing round and holo displays spring up but every vital display is flatplaned. The only decaying attractors belong to biochemical processes that are still proceeding in cells which don't yet know the organism is already dead.

No curse on my lips, nor tears in my eyes – some things are too vast for such petty reactions to count at all, as our remaining dreams and hopes are swept away like a feebly protesting ant tossed upwards by the mighty hurricane, impersonal, remorseless and utterly implacable.

Her house was a white and silver dome, like a second miniature sun by daylight, perched atop a dusty flat-topped column of red rock too narrow to be called a mesa. The clear gel coating my eyes extended itself on command; even at max magnification from ground level, the best part of 20 kilometres away, I could see no signs of movement around the house, no IB flyers parked outside on guard, only hers, its licence plate visible. Maybe she wasn't expecting me. Maybe the IB hadn't even told her I was coming; the little info I had been able to access on her, my sister and mother, my creatrix and betrayer, indicated her resignation from SWSA five years before.

A nice isolation. The IB, if they were monitoring at all, were watching the TrafficNet and maybe relying on a rooftop scanner or some similar device, though it would have to be damned small for my enhanced vision not to make it out, and I could see nothing. I blinked three times, rapidly, and the gel slicked back to its normal shape and function, protecting my eyes against the sun.

Nobody in her right mind would approach any way other than by air. Nobody in her right mind would cross the searing desert in the full heat of day, nor assay the sheer vertical climb in the darkness of night, but I was unbalanced as much as unBalanced, and I knew it. Mortal betrayal tends to do that to a girl.

The Arizona sun grew hotter than a lava flow, molten rock turned fiery gold and white, and the children's bodies falling...

My mind shut progressively down, as the weight of my pack pulling my shoulders back and the need to keep walking, one step, then another, outweighed all other perceptions and became my universe, a Christian hell.

For burning hours, I walked.

The sun was crimson liquid dripping on the horizon when I reached the base of that great column of rock. I slipped my pack off and onto the ground, and sat down beside it, ignoring the burning heat beneath me, and waited for cooling darkness to slip across the sky.

I slept for a little while, I think, for when I looked up again the sky was pure black, frosted with starlight, and it was cool enough to breathe easily again, though still warmer than a summer's day back in Hope.

I slipped a tube of smartgel out of my pack and smeared my hands, and twisted the controls on my boots' ankles to set the soles' pores for max adhesion. I took out the handful of infocrystals and slipped them into my shirt pockets, and I took out the blaster – deactivated, good – and slipped it through my belt in the small of my back. I turned to the sheer rock face, and the blaster dug into me painfully. I wriggled my hips to settle its weight better, and it fell to the rocky ground with a clatter. This wasn't going to work.

I tipped the contents of my pack out onto the ground: water bottles, insulating sheet, comms module, map crystal, climbing line, light-sticks, protein bars. Then I put my infocrystals and blaster in the pack, squeezed it small and tightened it that way, and settled it on my back. No problem.

I blinked my eye-gel to night-vision and the night turned sparkling blue. I looked for hand- and foot-holds, jammed my fingers and toes into the first holds,

and hauled myself up. First move. Reach up, stretch, and pull again.

I climbed for 20 minutes before a crack in the face enlarged into a chimney and I squeezed myself inside and forced myself to rest. I thought about the water bottles, lying below at the pillar's base. Time to move on up again.

Twice I nearly fell off and died. After the second time, gorge rising, I had to find a small ledge and hug the rock face until the trembling stopped and I could continue.

Stretch and pull. Stretch and pull. Climb.

The level top was a shock. I hauled myself over the crumbling lip, wriggled forwards across the flat rock till I was metres away from the edge, then just lay down on my stomach, face against the hard rock, and thought of nothing but breathing calmly and relaxing exhausted muscles.

When I could, I got to my feet and unslung my pack. Carrying it in one hand, I walked around the dome's perimeter, past her rather sporty little flyer, to the entranceway. A tiny holo indicated that Natalie Silverthorn was in. Two other names, Adam Craybourne and Samuel Craybourne, were displayed at a lower intensity, indicating their absence.

She had a family. Of course she had a family. Why hadn't I thought of that? I was the one who was alone and wretched, not she.

"Open up," I said, and my voice was dry and cracked.

That, and years of different environments including toxic smoke inhalation, had caused divergence in our voice patterns. There was a twinkling red light as the house system scanned my retinal patterns to make sure – they, at least, remained identical – and the door membrane softened and I stepped right through, into her house.

She was sitting in a soft easy-chair, a hardcopy book open on her lap, a cup of coffee on a small table at her side. I blinked rapidly to readjust my vision: a pale polished wooden floor, clean pastel walls, a Ganado Red rug on one wall ... but my eyes returned to her. How strange. It was me sitting there, or almost. She was paler than me, softer and heavier, and she jumped with surprise when I dropped my pack to the floor.

"Nice room," I said.

"Oh, my God. You!"

"Oh, yes," I said. "Quite the happy reunion, isn't it?"

"Not hardly. I didn't want to see you when you got back to Earth, and I don't want to see you now."

"Can't face your own guilt?" I asked, and saw with satisfaction that she flinched.

She said nothing as I walked around the room, taking in the pottery displayed on pedestals, the still holos of her husband and son. The boy looked pale and sullen, heavy black eyebrows drawn together, nothing at all like Ash.

"Which one's Adam and which one's Samuel?" I asked, but she didn't answer.

She moved swiftly, then, out of the chair and heading for the nearest terminal, but I leaped for my pack instead of for her and the blaster came out faster than thought and I squeezed the stud and the terminal exploded with a loud bang.

She stopped dead, shocked into stillness.

"You're crazy," she whispered.

"Wouldn't you be?" I answered, and realized what I had said, and laughed out loud.

My laughter died at the bitter look in her eyes.

"Don't you realize," she said, "that you're the lucky one?"

"Really." I aimed the blaster at her. "Do you believe I'd use this on you?"

She nodded. She knew me that well, anyway. It was a start.

"It's a lovely night for flying," I said.

She backed away slightly, and I knew she thought I meant to take her outside and throw her off the edge.

"Oh, no," I said. "That would be far too easy. Let's go."

We went outside, sisters together, and the flat top was pale grey in the moonlight and soft cicada song enriched the night and I held the gun on her as she climbed into her flyer and slid over to the far side and I climbed in after her.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

I said nothing, programmed the course with control gestures from my left hand she could read as well as I, and I settled back, resting my wrist on the armrest but not letting my blaster's aim waver from her torso.

The cabin lights were off, and I blinked my way back to full night-vision. I watched her swallow nervously, looking out into the darkness with unenhanced vision, as the night enveloped our little flyer.

The Canyon de Chelly rose up on either side of us, breathtaking sandstone cliffs glowing peach in the morning sun, as we trudged along the canyon floor, littered with the stone fragments of erosion and avalanche. Neither of us spoke; her breathing was harsher than mine, though my steps probably wandered more. It had been 30 hours or more since I had last slept.

The flyer lay abandoned hours ago, far behind us. I carried the blaster in my right hand, and the comms and holoprojector modules from her flyer, taped together, in my left. I would have preferred that she carry the modules, but she might use them as a weapon if my concentration wavered.

We walked for a long time. At the foot of the sheer rock wall to our left, a cluster of tiny stone cliff-dwellings nestled, abandoned suddenly a thousand years ago by the mysterious Anasazi culture. No knowledge of their passing remains; an object lesson to us all.

Two centuries ago 8,000 Navajo – men, women and children, the battered survivors of Kit Carson's violent campaign of ethnic cleansing – started their Long Walk along this route at gunpoint, a walk that would end at Fort Sumner, and the death of thousands more from exposure and disease. I was sure the significance of this was not lost upon her, the other Nat, my enemy.

Finally, as we rounded a twist in the canyon's route, I knew we were at the spot.

"Stand there," I said. My voice was rough.

She walked to the foot of the cliff and stood very still.

"Why here?" she asked.

I had no answer. I just knew that this was the right place, that there was no room on this Earth for both of us, that the existence of us both together was an

abomination.

"*Naakiť*," I said. "My twin. The one who is two..."

I placed the holoprojector down on the ground between us.

"Listen," she said, and there was desperation in her voice, "I know the colony was hit by plague, what you've had to go through–"

I shook my head. She had no idea what I had had to go through, though I aimed to give her a glimpse of it before she died.

"But I – it wasn't good here, either," she continued. "You're the heroic one, don't you realize that?"

I stopped and looked at her.

"I just generated you," she said bitterly. "I flew out through the scull-gate, every particle duplicated as a tachyon, turned round and flew straight back home. The press used to hound me, wanting to know how you'd be feeling. You! Not me. As though I was just the cowardly one, the one that, that..."

She stopped. If it hadn't been for Ash, I might almost have forgiven her just then.

Had I cared once about cowardice, or about what other people thought? Maybe. A long time ago.

"Do you still do image-sculpting?" I asked.

"Sometimes." Her voice was calmer now. "Why do you ask?"

"The colony wasn't wiped out by plague," I said, thumbing on the holoprojector's power unit. "I faked the video logs. We always had a talent for editing images, didn't we?"

She swallowed uncertainly as I took the infocrystals out of my shirt pocket and slid them into the drive slot.

"Not plague," I said. "But maybe a form of madness."

The log images grew, dim in the blinding sunlight, but discernible all the same.

A dark purpose has descended on the colonists, and I trail behind them as they bear the unprotesting children out of the settlement and up into the hills. Frank, the volcano expert, leads the way. I am at the rear, following numbly, and Ash's dear sweet body is lying back in the med-dome's morgue.

Floating glowglobes trail overhead like playful orange fireflies, but the camera-drones were sent back to base, and I'm probably the only colonist who hasn't thrown away her video lapel-pin.

Who knows how long we march, grim and silent? Finally, we reach the place. A long stone bridge, a natural arch, spans a long deep chasm of blue-grey shadow-bound rock, and down below a viscous river of golden lava writhes and spatters and the air wavers with the heat, and the stink of sulphur stings the nostrils but no tears come, not for that, not for anything.

And all I can do is watch.

...Watch while they march out onto the bridge's apex, hear their muttering, know what is in their hearts: the deep knowledge that Balance has cursed them, and that their offspring are not as they.

I don't follow them onto the bridge. From the abyssal edge, I can see enough.

See young bodies falling, arms waving, just a little, as they plummet down towards the lava.

There are no screams. It is the ultimate accusation:



nobody truly human, child or otherwise, could go to such death without a murmur.

One by one the children drop, and as they reach the flowing molten rock there's a blaze of yellow light and at first it looks like flame as they're incinerated but I sense that twisting distortion of all that is real and solid and now I'm not so sure.

Nobody meets my eyes as they trudge back off the bridge. Nobody talks. They file back towards Hope, whose name now mocks us, and I watch the burning river for a while, and turn to follow them.

When we get back to the settlement, Frank is waiting outside the med-dome, and, shrugging hopelessly, I lead him inside to see his son. The morgue room is gleaming and sterile.

I press the button, and one of the corpse-drawers slides open, and Ash's white-skinned body is lying there, still and shrunken, hands crossed on his chest – its chest, the shell that was once my son – and his, its, eyes are closed, but not as in sleep. Our son is gone.

Silent tears track down Frank's cheeks as he reaches out to touch Ash's cold, still hands.

Ash's eyes open wide.

In them, a dark light dances.

I told her, then, the other Nat, as I shut off the display, how the children had somehow reached inside Ash and killed him, or so we thought, and how they – and we, the adults – had always acted differently on Balance, as though reacting to things we never could quite see.

"What did you do?" she asked quietly.

"I grabbed Ash and a survival pack, and we ran for the hills," I said. "Ash's LXDS virus condition was gone. We had no microdoc, but he seemed healthier than ever except that he never spoke, not once, not even when they..." My voice faltered.

"They tracked you down, didn't they?" said the other Nat. "The other colonists."

"Oh, yes, they were good at that," I said bitterly. "We eluded them for three days, Ash and I, but they came upon us at dusk as we were making camp and there were too many of them, just too many, and it was dark and I couldn't get them off me, not while they, they..."

She was silent.

"Frank led them," I whispered. "He was always good at tracking."

"I'm sorry," said the other Nat.

She took a step forwards, and I raised my blaster.

"I know," I said.

She stopped, and death stared at me out of her eyes.

"Tell me," I said. "In the video log, did you see something strange when they hit the lava? The children?"

"They didn't scream," she said. "Ah... A flash of flame, what you'd expect. That's not the answer you're looking for."

I shook my head. Perhaps it was all in my imagination. Or perhaps you had to be there, to see that awful twisting of space, in a way that would not show up in the log. When I watched the log, for sure, it was my own memory I really saw.

"Remember old Agnes Arrowsmith?" she asked. "How she made us spend hours speaking and thinking in Navajo, then trying the same things in English and showing how impossible it was to transliterate thought?"

"I remember," I said.

I didn't want to remember. One thought filled my mind: one of us must die. Memories were an unsettling intrusion.

A verb-based, process-based language has a different view of the world. In Navajo, we would not have flown the flyer – only birds can fly – but would have caused it to fly (as pilots) or flown along with it (as passengers) in a way that would not admit of one entity being dominated by another.

"And Aunt Josephine angry at us for killing the scorpion that bit us? And how she would tell us how her grandparents were given their surname."

"A hundred times," I said. "A thousand."

Her grandfather was a silversmith's son, *béésh ligaiitsidii biye'*, and a well-meaning Anglo had translated *biye'*, "son of," as "Begay," and that became his name. Not an uncommon story among our people.

"On Balance," said the other Nat, "you had this other way of seeing things?"

"Oh, yes," I said.

She knew what she was doing, establishing a bond, knowing I couldn't kill her until she'd had her say.

"And that happened after the children were born?"

Cold claws running down my spine.

"No," I said. "It seems to me, things were always that way there. We always knew, for example, if one of us was in trouble."

"And is that what tells you I should die? That sense of the way things are?"

"*Naakií*," I whispered. "The one who is two."

And for a moment, then, I knew. I had not brought her here to kill her. But I had come here to watch her die. I knew, deep, deep inside, that if she just stood there in that spot for long enough, then she would die, for sure.

In the old Navajo way, crime was followed by a different kind of retribution; a murderer might support his victim's family, to restore the tribal harmony. In this, I prefer to follow the way of my father's people. Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord.

Death, now, was imminent. I had absolute certainty. I looked up at the pink and gold cliff stretching high above her, and death was fairly singing in the air.

"Surely not *naakií*," she said. "Rather *tá'i*, the one who is three."

I stared at her. Certainties began to crumble.

"What did you do after they killed your son?" she said.

"I healed up," I said. "And when I could, I stole the Phoenix and lifted off, and deployed its scull-gate and went through, and spent the long days coming home fixing the logs and working out my story. Something that would persuade SWSA not to mount an expensive follow-up mission. Missions to plague worlds don't look good on the budget reports."

"Yeah, right." She nodded. "So you found yourself replicated in the outer reaches of the solar system while the other Nat, our sister, is still in orbit round Balance, light-centuries away. You're the third Nat, not the second."

I lowered my blaster. Something was very wrong here.

"That's right," I said softly.

"Unless she's done something really foolish."

Like diving back into the atmosphere in an uncontrolled descent and burning up, deliberately.

"No," I said. "She wouldn't have done that. I know it."

"Because of the connection between you?" she asked.

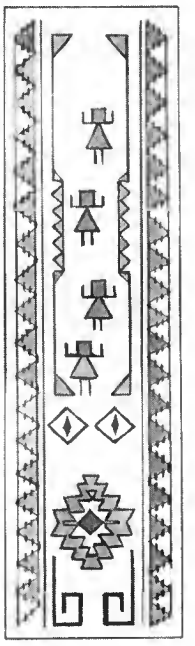
"Yeah," I said. "Because of that."

"Like the connection between you and me?"

I let out a long slow breath. That was it. That was what was wrong.

"Just like that," I said.

I was wrong. The second Nat's memories of betrayal flowed bitterly through me... but I was not her. She had duplicated herself to produce me, and she returned to face her fate on Balance, while I was safely here on Earth, stewing in my own guilt, focusing all my hate and rage on the first Nat when I was just as bad, just as guilty. I hadn't chosen to be the third, the one who got back to Earth – I had the same memories as Nat Two, up to her flight through the scull-gate she'd deployed in Balance orbit – and I could just as easily have been her. Fifty-fifty chance. But by that token, I had the same memories, up to the first scull-gate jump near Io, as the Nat who stood here in front of me, fearing for her life. We shared our childhood memories, we shared our very lives – up to a bifurcating point – so I was the betrayer as much as the betrayed, equally deserving of death... No. More deserving, for the Nat before me was innocent of all that had come after, for she had not watched the children plunge to their death with not even her voice raised to stop the slaughter, had not let them take her son, her dear boy, her Ash, not let them take him and, and...



Then I saw it.

That rippling, twisting distortion of space, surrounded by a black glimmering, and high above us the canyon wall was cracking, splitting open, and a section split off and fell straight down towards her, my sister...

"No!" she cried. "Don't!"

I crouched as I raised my blaster two-handed and squeezed, and the falling rock smashed apart into a thousand fragments and span off in all directions.

That black ripple shook, and I swear I sensed it snarl, saw something like a black malevolent sneer, a rasping claw, then the distortion closed up and vanished, that force that wanted one of us to die, as though it had never been.

"Nat!" I shouted, and it sounded strange in my own ears.

There was blood on her forehead when I reached her, catching her before she could fall, and her eyelids were fluttering.

"*Tsé dah hodzíílálii*," she said in a distant voice. "The Monster Who Kicks People Down the Cliff."

Or buries them at its base. So she had seen something too. A contagious madness, then.

"Funny," I said. "I thought it might be *Bits'íís lizhin*, the Black Body."

She gave a breathless shaky laugh.

"One of the holy *Haasch'ééh dine'é?*" she said dreamily. "Too much self importance. That's your trouble."

Then she went limp in my arms.

They'd made an effort with the decor – pink and orange pastel walls, flowering plants, free drinks-dispensers, an hv terminal – but it didn't help. Every hospital waiting-room's the goddamn same, bleak and hopeless, tinged with the smells of chemicals and despair.

Cly was lounging back in the chair opposite mine, booted feet crossed at the ankles, and his hat tipped down over his eyes. His wide shoulders still strained his Tribal Police uniform.

He looked like a graven wooden statue. Maybe he was fast asleep. Or maybe he was content to be silent, having nothing to say, just as a good Navajo should.

The Anglo half of me was more restless. I got up from my seat and switched on the terminal, and accessed the news channel.

A glass skyscraper, strewn in shards across a Shanghai street. Corp-wars again.

Shanghai. I'd never been to Shanghai.

Cly gave a quiet grunt.

"At least it's outside your jurisdiction," I said, waving down the audio volume.

He smiled, and I was very glad that it was he who had responded to my distress call. His souped-up police flyer had sped us from the Canyon de Chelly to Phoenix – the city, not the starship – at a sickening velocity, while I had used his microdoc on Nat...

"You can come in, now." A smiling orderly was standing beside a doorway, beckoning us in. "Just for two minutes."

Cly got to the door ahead of me, but let me squeeze by first.

Nat, my sister Nat, was sitting up in bed, and I carefully squeezed her in a hug, and kissed her cheek.

"Very odd," she murmured as I drew back.

"You're telling me," I said. "Or you're telling you, if you'd prefer."

The gel across her forehead was already a fine tan colour, and I needed no diagnostic displays to tell me she was going to be all right.

Her laugh was healthy enough.

"I'll be here for another four or five days," she said. "Adam and Sam will be here tomorrow. They were in Paris."

"Very nice," I said.

"I don't suppose..."

I glanced at Cly, and he was grinning.

"She can't make it," he said. "She's attending a Ghostway ceremony, with me."

"You're joking," she said, but she knew as well as I that I needed cleansing of ghostly contamination.

"No," I said. "But I'd like to meet them. Please."

"Any time," she said. "Sam's my son, by the way."

The orderly chucked us out then, telling us that Nat needed her rest and we could see her again tomorrow. Waving, we left the room and the door sealed shut behind us.

In the waiting room, Cly looked around, spotted a fire exit, and we left that way.

"It's okay," he explained. "I'm a law officer."

The baking heat hit us, rising up from the parking lot, and we hurried to get inside his air-conditioned flyer. Tomorrow I'd be in a sweat ceremony and ready to kill for coolth like this.

He opened the holo display and placed a call to Aunt Josephine's code, but it was my nephew Dave's face which appeared.

"I've got Nat with me," said Cly. "We'll be with you by nightfall."

"Okay. Great-Aunt Josephine's skimmer returned in one piece, even though it was flying on auto. So I guess it's safe for you guys to come back."

"Don't be cheeky," I said, leaning into his view, and blew him a kiss, then killed the display.

Cly blew out a breath.

"Where are you going to go afterwards?" he asked.

"Shanghai," I said.

"You're kidding."

I shook my head. Until he asked the question, I hadn't known the answer.

"It just seems," I said slowly, "The right place to go, just now."

"Where they're blowing up buildings and stuff?"

"Yeah. Crazy, isn't it?"

He gunned the engine into life.

"Crazy like a witch, perhaps."

The parking lot and the sprawling white hospital fell away beneath us.

"So how do you control things with the butterfly effect, again?" I asked, teasing.

"Tame the butterfly." He swung the flyer on a long banking turn to the left. "Shoot it, if you have to."

"Yeah. Okay."

Within seconds, desert with scattered mesquite was flying past in a blur beneath us.

"You gonna need some help out there?" asked Cly, looking carefully ahead.

"I don't think so," I said. "I expect to poke around, call a few people and tell them what I find. Nothing dangerous."

I had two friends I could call on, who worked in government think-tanks. Let them worry about the butterfly. I was just going to report on its whereabouts.

"I'll be back soon," I added.

"Good," said Cly.

Red desert below, blue sky above, and us, hawk-like, in balance between them both. It is the land, and the spirit of the land, which defines our souls, and I knew in that moment that I would never die away from home. Far and forever, the flat desert and winding canyons stretch, harsh and serene, immediate and timeless, the nursing mother of life and the snatching hand of death, while *ma'íí* the coyote howls defiance at the edge of chaos and with that, my sisters, we must be content.

John Meaney's previous stories in *Interzone* were "Spring Rain" (issue 61), "Sanctification" (issue 69), "Timeslice" (issue 75), "Sharp Tang" (issue 82) and "Parallax Transform" (issue 89). He lives in Tunbridge Wells, Kent.

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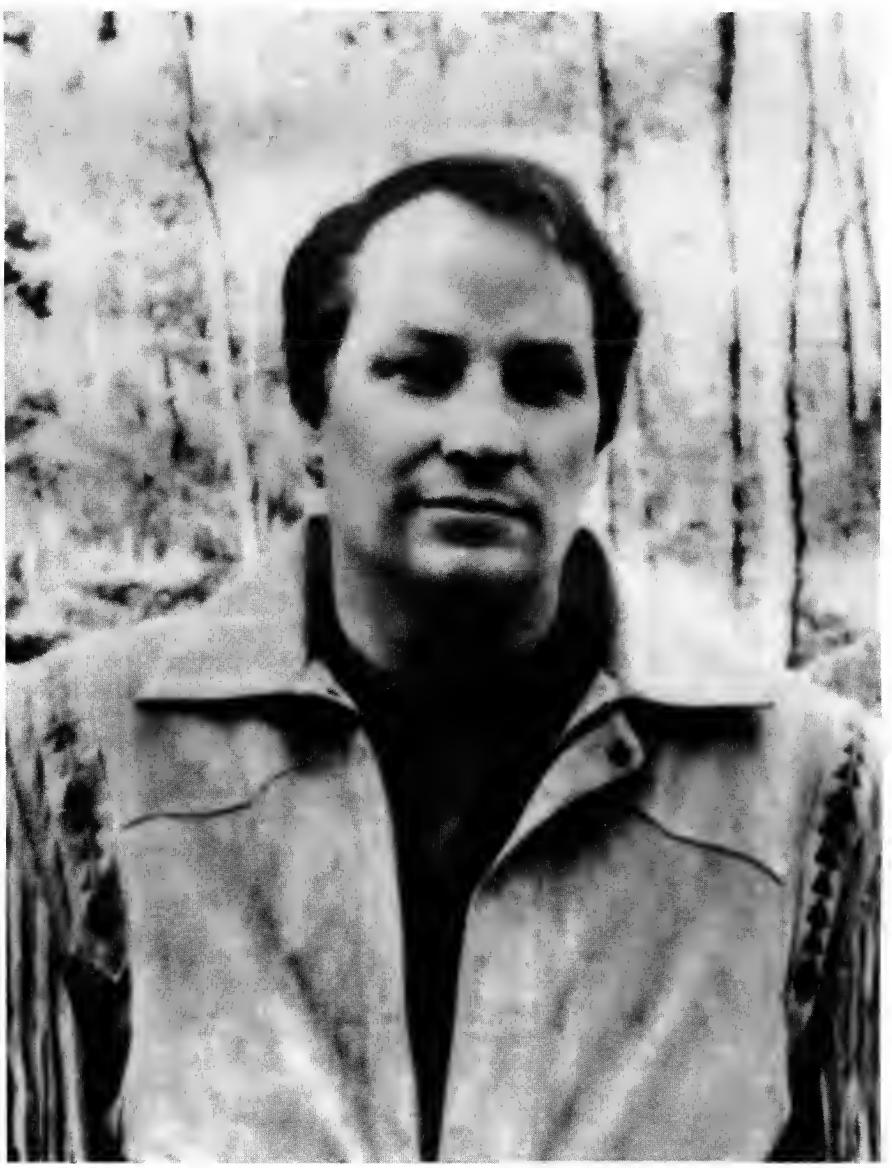
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The SF-Western-Crime-Horror-Dark Fantasy Man

Joe R. Lansdale
interviewed by
Barry Forshaw



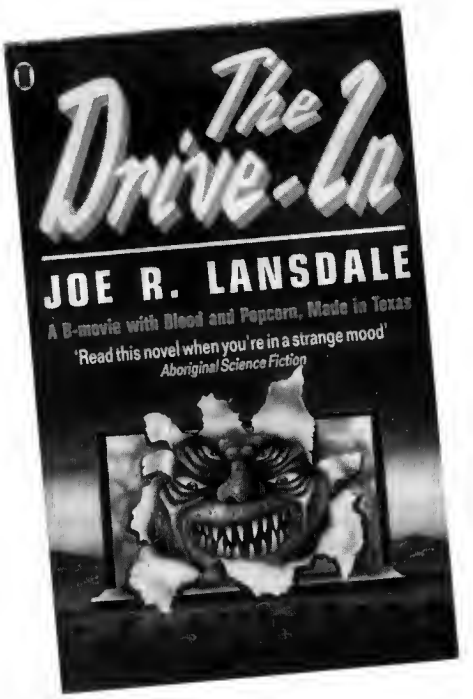
Joe Lansdale is a man at ease with himself. The amiable, solidly-built Texan negotiates the pressures of a British publicity tour for his latest book with the laid-back assurance of someone completely unfazed by the marked contrast between his spectacular Texan drawl and the British consonants around him. And if the truth be told, he's clearly aware of the delight we Brits take in his accent and in the salty anecdotes he diverts us with so readily.

What kind of an author is he? Science fiction? No doubt: his two "Drive-In" novels – *The Drive-In (a B-Movie with Blood and Popcorn, Made in Texas)* (1988) and *The Drive-In 2 (Not Just One of Them Sequels)* (1989) – posit a threatening, surrealistic universe in which a comet creates monstrous entities comprised of human flesh, TV screens and the detritus of a debased (but fondly recalled) popular culture. Is he a horror writer? The collection *By Bizarre Hands* (1989) is one of the most strongly-imagined batches of chilling stories in decades, with an imagery that disturbs and astounds in equal measure. Crime writer? His novels featuring Hap and Leonard, an unlikely alliance of a white, straight (and ultimately honourable) good ol' boy and his gay black partner have been the breakthrough books for him: *Mucho Mojo* (1994) and *Two-Bear Mambo* (1995) have transformed Lansdale from a genre favourite to a seriously hip figure – even though he's quick to maintain that he's anything but "hip" himself.

I met him at the offices of his British publishers, Gollancz, and over coffee (rather than the straight rye one might expect), I asked him if, like me, many of his readers had come to him via the two *Drive-In* novels. "In this country, yes", he replied, "but in the States, my short stories have been my calling card. *By Bizarre Hands* seems to be a favourite with many people, and a novel I did called *The Nightrunners* [1987] always had a good response." I agree that this is one of his most riveting reads, and he smiles his appreciation.

A suggestion that his career has now gone off onto different paths from science fiction and horror draws the response: "It always has, really – although I suppose it's a more dramatic change now. When I was a kid, I wanted to be a science-fiction writer, but by the time I'd actually started to write anything, I was beginning to see being a crime writer as my ultimate goal. There wasn't much of a crime market then, but I probably wouldn't have been any good, anyway – at least I had a chance to serve my apprenticeship. I was asked to write a short story for an anthology – I think it was called *Mummy* – and the next moment I looked up, I was firmly in that field. But I began to try to bring more of what I wanted to write into that arena."

Lansdale eases his solid frame into a more comfortable position and chuckles. "It wasn't easy – those genres have their own demands. I've never written in a genre I didn't enjoy – horror, science fiction, whatever – but I found that the supernatural elements began to go" – he makes a shooting gesture with his right hand into the Strand outside the window – "in that direction." I ask if he means that he grew bored with them, rather than dispatching them to the Savoy Hotel outside. "No. And I'm not trying to make some kind of statement suggesting that supernatural fiction isn't worthwhile. It's just that – well, I suppose, I found myself moving in the direction of realistic horrors. That's what really scared me. Although, even then, I was playing around with the horror conventions. I tried to undercut the horror with humour. No – not undercut – I tried to make them work side by side. That was something I learned from Robert Bloch. Bob Bloch was one of my heroes – and he could pull off that trick of writing something really horrible, then counterpoint it with something humorous. I think that's why Hitchcock picked up on *Psycho*. Those twin elements were there – Hitchcock made some changes, and he deserves all the credit he received, but Bob was right there. He was on the money."



The reference to films is not surprising. Lansdale's work is shot through with a knowledge of, and love for, the medium – and not just accepted classics of the art like *Psycho*. *I Married a Monster from Outer Space* is in there too, along with *The Amazing Colossal Man* and *The Toolbox Murders*. Although he insists he's not just writing for an audience that would pick up on such references, he doesn't deny that it's an asset to be familiar with such movies to get the full flavour of his fiction. "I'm part of the drive-in culture", he says. "Of course, it's gone now. I grew up in those places. Whole families would go – not to the more graphic movies like *Night of the Living Dead*, of course. There you'd have the teenagers; but they wouldn't be watching the movie, as I was: you'd see the cars rocking...

"It was a whole different culture. You could go in your underwear, your pyjamas – you could wear your bunny slippers... If the mosquitoes didn't get you, you'd have a great time. It was also a car culture. People had cars – you couldn't get anywhere without cars. All that ends up in my books."

I ask if he could written his books without this strong underpinning of popular culture. "No," he says decisively. "Absolutely not. It's essential to me. Of course, that's not to say that I don't like what you might call sophisticated culture – but don't forget how things can change. Some high culture, after a few years, can be devalued; but, by the same token, look what can happen to pop culture. *Film noir* – that was once the despised 'B' crime movies, now they're taken very seriously. And Edgar Rice Burroughs – his time may come." I suggest, tentatively, that it's difficult to read most Burroughs as an adult. But Lansdale is not to be deflected. "I've just finished a Burroughs novel; that's to say, I was asked to complete an unfinished book, a Tarzan book – and I grew up on Tarzan. Okay, some Burroughs is difficult to take these days, but the first Tarzan book, *Tarzan of the Apes*, is a very solid piece of work. I just try to keep that original feeling, and add something of my own."

Of course, there is another figure from popular culture who may not be Lansdale's creation, but who he ha a serious chance of making his own – Batman. Talking about how seriously the character is now taken since the camp derision of the 1960s TV series – academic tomes, such as *The Many Lives of the Batman*, from university presses and the like – Lansdale waxes enthusiastic. "Batman – yes, another character I grew up with, along with Superman: I've just written an episode of this new high-quality animated series for him, too, and three of the Batman animated series. I was allowed to pitch them at adults: the series is very dark, takes on all the Dark Knight vigilantism and obsession. Of course, unlike the movies, I can't deal with the sexuality – Batman and Catwoman caressing each other's rubber suits; after all, the predominant audience is supposed to be kids, even though the series is so good it's acquired a strong adult following. I did a Mad Hatter and Ventriloquist episode; the violence level could be much higher in the latter, as we could destroy the dummy in a graphic way that wouldn't be possible with a human character. His 'death' is really quite disturbing."

Lansdale has written a Batman novel, too, *Captured by the Engines* (1991), a truly remarkable take on the

character that has all the intense criminality of *Mucho Mojo*. "All my books are for aficionados of one kind or another; you don't have to get the references, but they're there if you care to look for them. *By Bizarre Hands* – the stories there hopefully have several levels on which they work. That book is one of my own favourites, by the way. I believe it's not that easy to get in this country?" I agree, having had to rely on Joe's publicist to come up with a copy for me.

"I've done other collections like that in the States; one is called *Writer of the Purple Rage* [1994], and I try to play around with genres in that. There's a Godzilla story in it. He has problems, because he still wants to eat people and crush houses, so I put him in a kind of Betty Ford clinic for creatures – a sort of Monsters Anonymous. King Kong is there: he survived the fall, and gets around on crutches. I had fun with that."

Lansdale leans back in the well-upholstered chair of the Gollancz office, and we top up with coffee and Diet Coke. Through the frosted window we watch publishing people moving silently about their tasks – one of which is ensuring *Two-Bear Mambo*, the new Lansdale tome, is a success. "The Hap and Leonard novels were my breakthrough books, I suppose," Lansdale muses. "But I still see myself as a journeyman writer. I feel I should be able to turn my hand to anything, provided it inspires me. I do what I have to do to feed my family, and if someone says 'you shouldn't be doing those Batman books,' I'd say, politely, 'fuck you, I'm happy to do them.' There is a danger: if you do too much of that sort of stuff, people begin to perceive you as not very serious, so you have to strike a balance. And speaking of balance, that's what I have to get in terms of the violence in the animated series."

Lansdale strokes his chin with a wistful expression. "Violence, you know ... I have a reputation for being pretty graphic, and I know I can be. But there's a part of me that hankers for the restrictions of the Hayes Code that so strictly controlled the movies of '40s. I know it could be ridiculous – that famous Hayes Code directive about *Casablanca*: 'There must be no suggestion of a sex affair between Bogart and Bergman' – we all knew what Rick and Ilsa were doing in Paris, for Chrissakes! But, nevertheless, film-makers could get around those strictures with real ingenuity. Remember the dialogue in *The Big Sleep*? Bogart again, this time with Bacall – the chat about horse-racing and who's in the saddle. Now, that clearly sailed past the censors' heads – I don't think they were any too bright. But it's delicious stuff for us today: I hear dialogue like that and think, 'wow!' There aren't any restrictions on the kind of dialogue I can use in my books, and I suppose I'm known for a certain kind of hard-boiled dialogue in which anything goes, but I feel I could have worked with the kind of codes Chandler and Faulkner had to deal with when they wrote those screenplays. And the violence – there's a scene in Aldrich's *Kiss Me Deadly*, a pretty violent movie for its time, but the most effective moment is a naked girl being tortured with cigarettes (very disturbing stuff, but all you see are her legs twitching) as frightening as anything in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*. And in my own books, I sometimes try



to use those methods. In one of my books, *The Savage Season* [1990], there's a scene where someone's hand is nailed down. People remember that as being very graphic, but it isn't really – it's just the set-up that's disturbing people. The actual incident is handled very briefly."

We've spent some time talking about violence, only one element in the tapestry of Lansdale's books, but possibly not surprising in the way that it exercises his readers' attention. I suggest that it seems to British readers that the world of his books – and, by association, America – is a considerably more violent place than this sceptred isle

"Oh, sure," Lansdale agrees, making no case for his countrymen's peaceful natures. "We are a more violent society, no doubt, but don't forget – I write crime novels. I'm often dealing with the worst elements of society: it's inevitable that violence is a part of their behaviour. And not just the heavies – I'm more than ready to criticize my central protagonists. I don't try to idealize Hap and Leonard, for instance. I want the reader to make up his own mind, I mean, these are guys who are trying to do the right thing, but frequently they fuck up. I'm not saying to the reader 'this is how you ought to be'."

Joe Lansdale, I'm beginning to realize, is the perfect interviewee, more than ready to talk about any aspect of his work one might care to bring up. I move into another area: I ask how he came up with the yin and yang of white/straight and black/gay protagonists. He answers quickly: "You said it yourself – 'yin and yang.' They're both parts of me. I find that many times I'm very conservative; and I spend as much time being very liberal. Most of the time I try to hit the middle of the road. Scott Fitzgerald was another influence on me, and he says somewhere (I'm paraphrasing), 'it should be possible for a man to hold two opposing points of view simultaneously.' For instance, when I have Hap and Leonard discuss sexuality Hap is initially uncomfortable with Leonard being gay – it'd be wrong for someone from his background to have a liberal New York sensibility. So I have him make his case as best he can, in his own words. Then I put myself one-hundred-percent in Leonard's corner to argue *his* case. And he's not entirely at ease with being gay. On another point, I remember Raymond Chandler said that in the real world Marlowe couldn't exist – his code of honour, his sensitivity, just don't go with the real world of detectives. So I tried hard with Hap and Leonard to make them as true to life as possible – their codes, and so on. These guys exist; I've known them. Of course – something else Chandler said about Marlowe – if he became too big a nuisance to powerful people, they'd just eliminate him. And I'm not sure my guys could get away with all they get away with.

"Having your own voice as a writer ... of course, that's so crucial. When I realized I'd found mine, that was such an exhilarating thing. But at times it can be a bit of a straitjacket. Sometimes, I just want to strike out in a different direction, but the imperatives are very strong now. Like with Hitchcock: he used to get asked whether or not he'd like to make a musical – but he said everyone would be waiting for one of the chorus-line to drop dead.

"I've written all kinds of things. I've written for literary magazines. I've written stories where nobody gets shot. But I suppose I just lean towards the dark, the grim, and I don't know why – I'm a happy son of a bitch, I get along with people. But I have seen some ugly stuff in my life, and it must have left its mark."

Ugly stuff... I remember that Lansdale once talked to fellow crime-

writer Mark Timlin about the legacy of Vietnam. Does this spectre haunt him as it does writers like Robert Stone?

"Unquestionably. The '60s – Vietnam, civil rights – that was all a part of what moulded me. But I don't think I have the expected profile of a writer who comes out of the '60s, in the same way as I don't feel I conform to being a 'hip' writer, which I'm told I am. I try to avoid the stereotypes."

This leads me to comment on another writer to whom Lansdale has been compared: that other poet of violence from the heart of America, Cormac McCarthy. Clearly, Lansdale is not the kind of recluse that McCarthy has become. "No way – I'm a pretty gregarious type, as you can see, right?"

I feel it's time to get around to another preoccupation to be found in the books – religion. Does the rise of the religious right in America worry him? Does he see it as a threat?

"Oh, sure – more than a threat. They'd destroy a writer like me if they had their way. They hate everything I stand for – a mutual thing, I have to say. They're not as powerful as people in this country seem to think, but they're more powerful than many who would dismiss them. You may have noticed I seem to have a hard-on for religion in my books" – I nod – "but it's not that I'm anti-religious. For those who need it, fine. But it's when they tell me, and you, what to do and how to live our lives... well, that's when I get really uncomfortable. In one of the books (without giving too much away) I make one of the most self-righteous characters guilty of truly monstrous actions. And I've known that – people who loudly express all the conventional pieties, but who have committed some appalling action.

"There are those capacities in so many people – such as hidden reservoirs of violence. I went to school with a guy – quiet, unassuming – who murdered his parents and grandparents. You just never know. But don't let me give you the impression that the South is more violent than it is. I actually feel more threatened in New York. I'm out of my element there."

And London? Lansdale smiles. "Well, in the UK the only trouble I've encountered was on a late-night tube run. My wife spotted a guy trying to take a lady's purse. I had to discourage him." This last is said without any braggadocio whatsoever, but one is reminded of Joe's famous martial-arts skills – one of his books is dedeicated to his karate teachers.

It's getting late, and I'm to accompany Joe and his UK publicist to a British Fantasy Society evening. We grab our coats, and I fire a final question. Given that the British have so taken to him, how has he taken to the British? I press him for an honest answer – diplomacy just won't do.

"I really like it here, and that's a one-hundred-percent honest answer. Your gun laws, for instance – they really work here [a surprising comment from a known gun-fancier]. No, really, they work. They wouldn't in the US, it's true: you can't dis-invent the guns that all the bad guys have there. An unarmed cop wouldn't last five minutes. But I really feel relatively safe on the streets here. And guns shouldn't be available to anyone. Collectors? Fuck the collectors. If my stamp collection was dangerous I'd be prepared to give it up. But to get back to your question: do I like the British? I know you're looking for me to say you're a tight-assed race, but hey – you read all my books, science fiction, crime, horror. What can I say? Rule Britannia!" ❖

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Tulips from Amsterdam

Ian Watson

"So," said Tulip to me, uncrossing her long legs, "I climbed into the car with this fellow, and we cruised on to the motorway..."

Tulip was what her friends called her, so she said. In her olive-green jeans and tight chartreuse sweater she was certainly long-stemmed. She wore her short dyed hair in upright gelled petals of orange and yellow and apricot. A tiny golden tulip adorned her pierced right nostril. Quite a glorious and exotic creation she'd made of herself. Not garish. The punk hair was chic rather than brazen. The nose trinket was a perfect grace-note. How I desired her, though first I must carefully assess her.

As soon as Tulip had come into my office I had abandoned my cluttered desk and shown her to one of the two cosy chairs beside the low interview table. She had demurred at being recorded on cassette. I respected her wish. I cradled a notepad on my lap.

Slim nose, high cheek bones. Opaline eyes: green within cream. Gold subtly shadowed the orbits and brows, like a dust of pollen.

"On the last day of last term," she said, "which was a Friday, of course, we were all given an art history test to take away with us." Her voice was surprisingly sweet, with a hint of Scots. There were no raucous or shrill notes such as often spoil a first impression of grace and intelligence.

"Our test took the form of a photo in a sealed envelope. Printed on the front was the instruction: *Don't open till Saturday morning.* Most of us would be travelling miles the next day, but by the evening of the same day we were supposed to write a page of comment about whatever painting the photo showed and post our page back in the stamped addressed envelope provided. By that time the college library was already shut, so I didn't sneak a look at the photo right away. Too much else to do."

"This sounds more like an initiative test for secret agents," I said. "Who dreamed it up?"

"Roger Weeks. He hoped we'd be spontaneous and ingenious."

I didn't know Weeks very well, but I was aware that he was innovative.

"Well now," said Tulip, "I was sitting with this stranger in his BMW doing about eighty in the slow lane, because the motorway was fairly empty –"

I must have pursed my lips. She nodded briefly.

"I know I shouldn't hitch on my own! Rapists, murderers, and molesters. It saves *money*, and I was skint. Deep in the red. Still am, in fact."

"I'm sorry." I never offered even a token fee in exchange for stories in case my subjects invented accounts in the hope of earning some cash. What I needed were genuine volunteers. There were always enough of those. Subsequently I might invite Tulip out for a drink and a meal. I couldn't be sure yet. Her arrival in my office at four o'clock put us conveniently close to such a possibility.

"So I opened my envelope and I started looking at *this* –"

From her suede patchwork bag she took a colour photograph, which she laid on the table and angled to face me.

In the painting the bearded faces of half a dozen peering men were illuminated by golden light. Black clothes with big white ornamental ruffs around the necks. Background: dark grey and black.

"A Rembrandt, isn't it?"

She laughed. "You pass the test. Who else paints so dark and so bright?"

In the foreground lay a chalky corpse, naked but for a cloth across the loins. The only person who was wearing a hat – big-brimmed and black – was probing with slim silver forceps at the left arm of the corpse. A flayed, blood-red arm. A dissection was commencing.

"Mister BMW glanced at the photo on my knee and he said to me, 'That's *The Anatomy Lesson*. Painted in 1632, or thereabouts.' Wow, he recognized it! –"

The driver, as Tulip described him, was both dishy and dusty. Dishy, as regards craggy features and a moderately athletic body attired in an expensive grey suit, blue silk shirt and arty tie with pastel butterfly motifs. Dusty (in her parlance) as regards thinning wayward grey hair and a certain pallor to his skin, not unlike that of the corpse laid out for dissection. The man must have been about 50. Tulip couldn't decide whether a small mulberry birthmark on his forehead, in the shape of a mushroom, was fascinating or icky.

He was, so he said, a publisher's representative. Name of Tony. He travelled a lot. Stayed in motels mainly. He liked motels. He would curl up with a book if no finer entertainment offered itself.

What did this hint mean? Did Tony sometimes pick girls up at motorway service stations? Tulip suspected so. This sort of come-on was definitely dusty – if it really was a come-on.

Tony had grinned at her expression. Oh, but books are best, my dear, especially artistic books! Can't be too careful nowadays...

Was this meant to be reassuring? Maybe Tony was nervous. Tulip began to peg him as someone who liked to talk a bit dirty and experienced, so as to impress; but who didn't actually do much about whatever fantasies he harboured – one of which was now tantalizing him in the person of herself.

"Why didn't you tell him to stop and let you off?"

"What, on a motorway at eighty? Anyway, he knew about the Rembrandt. I didn't know a thing about this particular painting."

Nor was I her moral counsellor. She was there in my office to tell me her story. I was about to collect it.

The weird thing was that this story was being recounted as having happened to *herself* – not to a friend, or to a friend of a friend. Could Tulip have misunderstood my interests, as outlined on a notice permanently pinned in the students' union?

For the past ten years I'd been collecting and classifying urban legends. Principally I taught sociology and social anthropology to a wide range of students at this so-called University of Blanchester. The university was an amalgamation of technical and higher-education colleges and an art school. These days, every place worth its salt must be a full-blown university so as to emulate mainland European educational standards (at least on paper).

The reality is overcrowding and scant resources and student poverty, along with a fudging of the unemployment statistics. Rejoice, nowadays we have three million young people in higher education!

Some of my students applied to study sociology because the subject seemed inherently interesting and they knew that realistically they had few job prospects on graduation, whatever humanities course they chose to study. Others were being "humanized" as a sideline to their main degree work in computer studies or graphic design or whatever. They were a rich source of urban myths – though the Tale of the Starving Student Who Sold a Kidney Because his Student Loan was Three Months Late was rather close to the knuckle of truth, at least as regards the straitened circumstances of the young and the scandalous sloth of the Student Loan Company.

Events in urban legends never happen to the person from whom you hear the story. They happen to someone more distant – to an acquaintance of an acquaintance. The mysterious hitchhiker never rides with your informant, but with a friend of a friend of the informant. It is in that other person's car that the hitchhiker leaves the blood-stained hatchet. Your informant swears to the total truth of the tale. If you manage to track down the person to whom the incident supposedly occurred, why, actually it befell a friend of theirs. Or a friend of a friend.

Welcome to modern mythology – which concerns not Gods and Goddesses but homicidal hitchhikers and baby-sitters in peril and microwave ovens.

The Kidney Transplant? A favourite story of mine! And how symptomatic.

The person who wants the kidney is the owner of a lucrative Indian restaurant. The illegal operation will be carried out secretly by his brother, who is actually a vet, a graduate of Calcutta Veterinary School (exact details may vary) and a competent animal surgeon. In the clinic adjoining the vet's home there's an operating theatre, normally used for cats and dogs and rabbits. Some dogs are huge, thus the table is full size.

No sooner is the kidney successfully removed from the student than a lorry skids into the utility pole outside the clinic. This brings down the power line. Bye-bye to the electricity supply for at least the next 24 hours. Woe to the refrigerator which would have chilled the kidney till the following evening when the organ would be inserted into the brother.

The brother rushes back to his restaurant with the kidney in a container labelled with the student's name, to pop it in one of his own fridges. None of the waiters nor the chef know about the secret arrangement. The boss tells them sternly to *keep this box safe*.

The starving student recovers with remarkable speed. In fact, the very next day, to celebrate his new prosperity, he goes to the Indian restaurant for lunch and orders its Special Meat Curry. A waiter knows the student by name. The waiter knows that the container in the fridge is labelled with this customer's

name. Consequently he hands the kidney to the chef...

Naturally there are gaping holes in the story. If the student is so destitute, how is he a habitué of a restaurant in the first place? (But if he isn't, how else would he know the manager well enough to make a clandestine bargain with him?) Most so-called Indian restaurants are actually run by Bangladeshis or Pakistanis, not by Indians. Kidneys play no noticeable role in the cuisine of the subcontinent, at least in the versions tailored for Britain – the macho Madrases and Vindaloos and other milder Tandoori concoctions. And as for the need to match donor with recipient, ho ho! No matter. The story speaks eloquently.

And Tulip spoke on, while outside on this February afternoon the sun was already low but blindingly bright, a trembling glaring ball of molten brass amidst a haze of richly pink and orange chiffon.

The dome of the sky was icily blue. Clouds were few and frail and unmoved by any breath of wind. Asthmatics, beware. For the past two days the chilly atmosphere had been motionless, trapping smoke and car fumes.

Beyond the low-slung engineering block and the town's rooftops and a church steeple, the horizon wore a frieze of pollution haze which that sun was tinting gloriously. Above that frieze floated long interweaving brown strands. While I was away from my office earlier, holding forth in a lecture room, jet fighters had been practising low-level flying over the farmland beyond the town. Those loose plaits of brown smoke mapped how the jets had hugged the contours of the land. What filthy fuel those planes must have burned, full of additives to supercharge the engines.

The glaring sunlight revealed all the dirt on the outside of my long office window, as though simultaneously providing illumination and also paradoxically a veil of privacy. Presiding over the heaped desk and thronged bookshelves and a grey steel filing cabinet (as well as over Tulip and myself, companionably close to one another) was an enlarged colour photograph of a wizened West African, taken by yours truly years ago. That old chap was a *griot*, a tribal storyteller. I had long since glided away from third-world social anthropology into the anthropology of industrial society – rather as Elizabeth, my sly African ex-wife, had glided away from me soon after she accomplished her transition from Africa to the Northern World. I'd been little more than her passport provider, so it seemed!

One new book which had recently captured Tony the traveller's attention – so that it was still at the top of his mind – was a volume of famous medical paintings. The book included such masterpieces as Hieronymus Bosch's *The Cure for Folly*, in which a quack drills into the head of a lugubrious melancholic, performing a misplaced medieval lobotomy. Particularly fascinating to Tony, for some reason, was Rembrandt's *Anatomy Lesson*. Maybe this was because he drove a lot, and feared ending up on a slab in a morgue.

"So Tony said to me, 'I can tell you all about it –'"

Such coincidence is the very essence of urban legend.

"'For instance,' he hinted to me, what would you say about the clothes those men are wearing –?'"

Sombre and sober clothes.

Oh yes. But costly too. Those big posh white ruffs. These people are dignitaries. Burghers; members of the guild of doctors. The dissection is an important social as well as scientific occasion.

Come on, Tulip, cudgel your brains, what else about the clothes?

Um...

Why, the clothes are heavy and warm. Consequently it's wintertime. Before fridges were invented, dissections could only take place during the winter months. Otherwise, half way through the procedure, the cadaver would have begun to rot. A thorough dissection could last a week or more. We aren't talking about quick butchery.

At this point Tony veered on to the matter of student poverty – which was obviously why Tulip was hitchhiking, despite the number of horrible incidents these days.

Tony had heard that some female students were turning to prostitution to pay for their fees and food and lodgings. Who would blame them, when a fellow might pay £80, the going rate, so he understood, for an hour of harmless fun?

The hint lay heavy. The BMW purred along at eighty, with cruise control engaged. Tony was fond of motorway motels, such bland anonymous rooms. He would be delighted to give Tulip an anatomy lesson. An art lesson. A profitable lesson, intellectually and physically and financially. Fun and money and no harm to anyone.

There: he had said his piece. Some beads of fidgety sweat sat on his brow. Anxiety and desire.

"Did you say no?" I asked. "Or yes?"

"I *was* skint," was Tulip's answer. "I still am, Dr Kershaw. Can I call you Richard? Or Dick?"

"I prefer Rich."

"Ah, Rich..." Compared with a student! Was the true purpose of her visit to solicit me?

Some people might have called me a philanderer because I had enjoyed a number of discreet affairs with students. I knew the itch of what one might call erotic frenzy, and I felt no shame about this, only caution. In these times of political correctness on campus, discretion and subtlety must be the watchword.

Our University of Blanchester had never gone so far as to employ an actual sexual-harassment officer. Some other universities did so for a while, until witch-hunts ensued – secret files on male lecturers, over-zealous "processing" units interrogating staff because of mischievous or spiteful tip-offs. At Blanchester we relied on an anti-harassment code.

Hitherto I had avoided pitfalls by choosing my young bed-partners wisely. In the last few years I'd restricted myself to students whom I didn't actually teach but who came in response to my notice to tell me an urban legend. An exception had been one of my foreign intake of students – a German *fraulein* – but continentals are open-minded. Despite Tulip's nickname (and the coincidental Rembrandt connection)

she couldn't possibly be Dutch. Her trace of accent was surely Scottish...

So far there had been no repercussions from my romances. Had Tulip heard a rumour about me? In a roundabout way was she propositioning me? Was she proposing that I should pay for my pleasure? Pay her, specifically, £80?

Or might she be an agent provocateur, one of the clique of feminists? My gut instinct said *no* to this.

Since the ride in the BMW had supposedly happened to Tulip herself the tale was *not* a legitimate urban legend. What's more, she *herself* was the hitchhiker. Urban myths frequently feature mysterious passengers who turn out to be ghosts or serial killers or Jesus Christ. Few indeed are the tales from the viewpoint of the actual hitchhiker!

"You know *my* full name," I said to Tulip, pen poised over the notepad. "May I not know yours?"

At this point I imagined that she might abandon her story. The story was a mere pretext for proposing an anatomy lesson – not in this office, to be sure, but in my flat that same evening after a few drinks and a meal, for £80 to fund her overdraft. Yet no. She plunged on, ignoring my desire to know her real name.

"I agreed, Rich. I agreed to Tony's proposal. And didn't that make him buoyant! Along we zoomed to the next service area complete with its travellers' lodge. I waited in the car while he booked a bedroom. He took the ignition key with him after smiling a sloppy apology. No hard feelings. It was always conceivable that I might drive off in his nice BMW. While he was away I looked in the glove compartment and found a pack of condoms. What do you know? They were within a year of their expiry date. Tony mustn't have had much luck lately. Maybe he kept those as a symbol of hope."

Likewise I always kept a packet in my pocket, though my luck was better than Tony's.

"We had lunch and a few drinks" – it was as if Tulip read my mind – "then we adjourned to this double room in the travel lodge. Tony shut the curtains. The bedspread was as red as that dissected arm in the photo. On the wall was a print –"

"Of a Rembrandt?" I asked mischievously.

"Hardly! That would have been much too gloomy. Lonely travellers might kill themselves in the room. It was a print of jolly yachts at Cannes or somewhere flying lots of colourful flags. A Dufy. We undressed –"

She was provoking me.

"– and the anatomy lesson began, not at all hastily. While he was touching me all over, exploring me with fingertips and tongue, true to his word he told me all about the painting –"

In her eyes was I exempt from the desires and anxieties enshrined in legends, incapable of arousal, a man of clinical objectivity? How could she imagine so!

"Dissections didn't actually proceed as in the painting, Rich," she explained. "The surgeon never began by flaying an arm." (I was imagining Tony's hands roving freely – as mine might later rove... if I chose, on this occasion, to pay for sex with her.) "First, you would remove the internal organs and dissect those, because they're soft and would rot soonest." (Despite this talk of soft decaying entrails, I was hard, as she must surely realize.) "You only deal with arms and legs towards the end. But if the painting had been accurate it wouldn't have been beautiful. It would have shown a mess of guts.

"There's another important reason why Rembrandt concentrated on the arm. You see, Rich, the first accurate illustrated volume about anatomy based on dissection was published by a Flemish genius working in Italy. Vesalius, that was his name –"

She seemed determined to give me a lesson in art history.

According to Tulip, during his own lifetime Vesalius had not prospered as he deserved. Blinkered colleagues resolutely believed ancient Greek anatomy texts based on guesswork. They refused to accept the evidence of his hands-on approach. Disillusioned, Vesalius moved to Spain. There he performed an autopsy, and unfortunately found that the heart was still beating. Because of this, the Inquisition prosecuted him. If the King had not intervened, Vesalius would have been hanged. Instead, he was sentenced to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. On his way back, he was shipwrecked and died on a Greek island.

By the year when *The Anatomy Lesson* was painted, it was widely recognized that Vesalius had revolutionized our understanding of the human body. In the painting the man performing the dissection is a certain Dr Nicolaas Tulp. Tulp was a notable Amsterdam surgeon and several times mayor of the city. What the painting asserts is that Tulp is putting Amsterdam on the map of modern science.

The frontispiece of Vesalius' famous volume depicts the great man as holding a dissected hand and arm. Aesthetic criteria aside, this is the major reason why Rembrandt shows the dissection as beginning with the hand and arm. Here in the person of Tulp is the contemporary Vesalius, equal to or greater than the original founder of anatomy.

Oh yes, and the man on the slab was a condemned felon who had been hanged for stealing clothes. His nakedness is in ironic juxtaposition to his crime – and to the well-dressed spectators. His skin is being unpeeled like a suit of clothes.

Tulp. Tulp. The name nagged at me. It was so like Tulip.

Tulips from Amsterdam...

"I know it's dangerous to hitchhike," she said. She patted her patchwork bag. "That's why I was carrying a scalpel for protection. And a little pistol too."

Panic surged through me. How could she possibly own a pistol? Did she have that pistol with her in that bag right now? Ought I to lunge at her?

"Don't you want to hear the rest of the story?" she asked with such a sweet smile.

"Look," I said. I didn't know what to say next. A scalpel, from the Art School – yes indeed. But a gun?

"It isn't so hard to buy a pistol nowadays, Rich." Her tone seemed very reasonable. "Not in the area where I live. You don't need to be a big-time villain involved in bank robberies. People even use pistols to

rob newsagents' shops."

What would a pistol cost? Two hundred pounds in a pub? How could she afford to spend so much if she was skint'? This didn't make sense. Terrifyingly, it didn't.

"After a while," she continued, "still naked of course, I took the pistol out of my bag and I pointed it at Tony. Tony was very scared. He went quite limp. I said to him, Now the true anatomy lesson begins, Tony-Daddy! I'm going to flay your right arm. I'm going to peel off some skin in payment –"

Was she insane? Maybe she merely said those words to her exploiter to shock and appal him. I was certainly horror-stricken. Was her main intention in telling me her story to appal me? The story might be a total concoction especially tailored for me!

How could this tale be true? It ought to be the salesman (no, a friend of his) who was relating this account of the lovely and terrible hitchhiker. *So he took her to a motel. He gave the anatomy lesson as promised. However, when they finished having sex and talking about Rembrandt, she pulled a pistol out of her bag and she said to him, "Now I'll give you an anatomy lesson."* Yes, this ought to have been the pattern.

But I was being told the story from the viewpoint of the ghost hitchhiker or serial murderer, and by that very person, that urban-legendary person, none other.

Maybe Tulip was a performance artist. Maybe I was being set up – being sent the mischievous or malicious equivalent of a strippergram!

Alternatively, Tulip might indeed be an *angry woman*, a politically correct virago whose aim was to punish me on behalf of her sisters for my seductions.

I realized that her description of Tony was an inverted description of myself. My own 50-year-old body had retreated – or rather, expanded away from athleticism. Unlike Tony, I boasted a fine tan. I used the sunbeds at the leisure centre. I also had a small birthmark which was shaped more like a banana than a mushroom. The birthmark wasn't on my brow but on the left cheek of my bum. Could she have learned about this from one of my previous young bed-partners?

Did she possess some kind of *inherent* knowledge?

The structural inversion of themes is a perennial feature of myth, as analysed by Lévi-Strauss. A more bizarre inversion seemed now to be occurring: not merely the substitution of the phantom hitchhiker for the driver-victim, but a replacement of reality by myth itself, so that I – the observer – was becoming entrapped in the direct experience of a legend. This was at once exhilarating and deeply scary.

How much more likely that Tulip was either a performance artist or a virago! And she might still be one of the new breed of part-time whores of academe, selling her flesh to pay for a course of study which would probably be useless. And ingeniously set upon manipulating me.

She toyed with her bag.

"So I said to him, Rich, if you scream or shout I'll shoot you dead. You can whimper or moan quietly. Or bite on a towel. I'll put some colour into you. Our world's so dusty these days. All the concrete and exhaust fumes. I need more colour –"

What insanity! *Tulip, Tulp...* Something about these two names taunted me, and suddenly I thought I knew why.

"Excuse me –" Her hand promptly slid inside her bag. "No, it's all right, Tulip, I'm not intending to leave the room. I need to look at a book."

"Go ahead," she allowed.

I rose. Was this when I should leap at her? When she would either shoot me, or shriek out that I was assaulting her? If I threw myself upon her, her bag might well prove to be empty of any weapon. My own account of what she had told me would seem incredible. If only I had been recording what she said!

I stepped to a bookcase. *Tibet's Myths and Mysteries*: this was the book I wanted. I took it out, flipped to the index and found the reference.

According to Tibetan myths a *tulpa* is the name for an illusory creature born from one's own mind in a hectic, obsessive state. A tulpa is a tangible apparition which achieves an independent existence, wilful and wild. Said a lama: "Beware of these children of the mind, these tigers to which you give birth..."

I had thought for so long about the phantom hitchhiker. I had thought about young women's bodies. Here was the hitchhiker, equipped with her own autonomous motivation. On yes, the hitcher and the serial killer and the phantom and the bed-partner all rolled into one.

"Rembrandt's anatomist wasn't really called Tulp, was he?" I asked.

"Of course he was, Rich," she said. "Later, I checked up on what Tony told me. *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Nicolaas Tulp*: that's the name of the painting."

If only I had some book about Rembrandt on the shelves.

Here was a punk angel of urban myth, come to me. A messenger from the realm of modern legend. An incarnation. How desperately, yet fearfully, I wished in one part of myself to possess this flower endowed with consciousness. What would I give to do so?

"It's getting quite late," she hinted. "Should we continue this over a drink and then a meal in town?"

Oh she knew, she knew. I did desire this outcome. How long must we enact the pretence that she was simply a student known to her friends as Tulip?

* * *

"The eclipse of reason is here," asserts Richard Kershaw.

A sunny print of daffodils hangs on the whitewashed wall. There's no glass in the frame. Glass might break into dangerous daggers. The glass of the window near the bed is faintly meshed with fine wire for safety and security; and the slim bars on the inside divide lawn from woodland and ground from sky very neatly. Richard's hand and forearm are pink from the plastic surgery he underwent. The glossy artificial hue suggests that part of him was remade in plastic.

Sitting upon the bed, he leans towards me as if convinced that his own collapse of reason has brought enlightenment.

"Because of this eclipse," he insists, "myths are moving closer to us. Myths are become people. People are becoming myths. Consider the million alien abduction stories in America – told in the contactees' own words as an experience which happened to themselves and not to somebody else! Isn't this proof? When I leave here, I intend to work on experiencing this abduction syndrome myself – as a participant."

"That painting by Rembrandt," I remind him, "really *is* of a man called Nicolaas Tulp."

Richard waves a pink hand dismissively. "That makes no difference, don't you see? Here's proof of a coming together, a new amalgam of mind. New connections in the psyche of the world."

"The world doesn't have a psyche," I tell him. "There are simply millions of separate individuals. Most of us have fundamentally similar mental patterns."

"No!" He thumps his patched hand upon the bedside table and splays his fingers painfully. "That's the old Thatcherite lie that society doesn't exist! It's the lie which led to so much selfishness and self-interest and to the cutting of state funding for transport and the elderly and –"

"– for students and suchlike." I can complete his sentence.

Wistfully he gazes at the daffodils.

"May I have a print of tulips on my wall instead?"

While I ponder, he adopts a tone of sham menace. If wheedling will not serve, a threat might persuade me.

"One day *you* might pick up a hitchhiker," he says sternly.

"I wouldn't dream of doing any such thing, Richard," I assure him.

"That's exactly what I mean about selfishness! Well, she may pick *you* up. An alien intruder not from some fanciful distant star, but from out of the mythic psyche of the world. An evolutionary crescendo is under way."

"To surrender reason," I insist, "is to forsake civilization."

I can predict his answer.

"Reason," he says, "is the dream from which we shall awake, just as prehumans once awoke to self-awareness and a form of logic." This conviction, at any rate, gives him an air of serenity and patience. Some of the time.

It's all too true that delusions of imminent transcendence are becoming far more common, often in dramatically violent fashion. Members of cults commit group suicide or die in gunfights with police. Jihads are proclaimed. At times I dearly wish I could peer 200 years ahead. Generally such a prospect terrifies me. Will my own rational and liberal mind-set remain in tune with what awaits? Or will religions ravish a depleted world which will never again launch itself moonwards or dissect the secrets of life and mind?

By therapeutic custody of such as Richard, I serve as an anxious jailer on behalf of the past and its struggles for progress. The plastic pink of Richard's arm validates yet ridicules my efforts, and those of rational scientists such as Vesalius and his successors in whatever discipline.

In this hospital I confront my fears daily and I control them. Here's the essential difference between myself and Richard. A dark side of his psyche accosted him and he was unable to regulate it. A person can actively cultivate madness in themselves. Madness will sprout and flower. How precious sanity is; and how precarious.

Beyond the oasis of controlled insanity which this hospital is, how many other wild blooms are burgeoning in people's minds, luminous and poisonous, as the calendar sheds its leaves day by day, approaching the millennium? Day by day, due to meagre funds, we release patients too early into the community, as though our real task is to pollinate the world with delusions.

I can never let Richard be released. His account of the incarnation of urban myth is far too potent – similar, as he himself points out, to the alien abduction fantasies, yet far worse.

If what he says happened is true – and I do believe it to be so – then because of his obsessions Richard acted as a magnet (or should I say a seed crystal?) which attracted a creature of the mind into existence, into physical reality. To release Richard back into the community would be to encourage Tulip and similar beings to roam in our midst.

When I do replace the print of daffodils with one of tulips, I shall leave a scalpel somewhere in this room for Richard to find. Where will the scalpel have come from? Patients quite often steal things if they have a chance. This gives them a sense of petty power. Poor Richard could have been given the blade by another inmate. Every afternoon he joins in a session of group therapy. We can hardly keep him in solitary confinement, can we? I tried to oppose this liberal attitude, but I was overruled.

Until now, I have regarded this hospital as a bastion. Yet essentially all along I have only been passive in my response to the death of reason. Reactive, not proactive.

Others in the past have behaved more positively. Right now I'm thinking of the way Jack the Ripper (much maligned) set out to purge London of whores. He was undoubtedly a doctor. That was about a century ago. The cycle of time has come round. Only, more so -because now is a millennium. Richard himself must cleanse the infection that he represents. Logic dictates this.

"A tulip," I tell him. "A single cut tulip in a vase. I'll find you a print if I have to search high and low."

How he smiles.

Ian Watson last appeared here with "How to be a Fictionaut" (issue 106). On that occasion we said that his new sf novel, *Hard Questions*, would be out from Gollancz in April. It was in fact put back to 20th June – see this issue's "Books Received."

Contacts

Lilith Moon

Chuck Driscoll sat down at his desk just then, otherwise he would never have seen it. It was cold in the observatory with the dome cracked open to the night. He had just come back from the hotplate with a fresh mug of coffee. He folded his hands around the mug and let the steam dampen his chin. It was just before his glasses misted up that he saw something incredible.

"What the...? Shit!" He spilled hot coffee over his cords. He jumped up and knocked his chair over. It clattered noisily under the high dome.

"Hey, Chuck! Fallen asleep on the job again?" Dolores Dos Santos puffed smoke from a forbidden cigarette.

Chuck swiped coffee ineffectually off his corduroys. "Shit no, shit, Dolores! Jupiter just moved."

"What?" Dolores stood and stretched in the puddle of light around her console. She drew a curl of cigarette smoke around herself. "You *were* sleeping, Chuck."

"No, honest. Come here. Take a look. Tell me I'm dreaming."

Dolores ambled over to Chuck's console, intrigued, but not much. Sometimes, she thought, Chuck acted strange just to get her attention.

"Look!" Chuck shouted at her. "See! Whadjatellya?"

Sure enough, Jupiter was gone, vanished from the monitor as if it had never been.

"Say..." said Dolores, "something must be out of alignment."

"No, I swear the starfield's the same. Jupiter just–" said Chuck, then he stopped. Space popped like a soap bubble and Jupiter came back again.

"Holy shit!" said Dolores.

"Did you see that?" Chuck tapped at his console. "Jesus, I hope we got that."

Tad Walters had this neural net on his work station. He called it BEMGrep. He'd trained it on noise and pulsars and intelligent radio transmissions – mostly indie rock. BEMGrep's purpose was to detect signals from alien intelligence, something Tad himself was more than a little sceptical of. In truth, BEMGrep was a toy, a bit of fun. The training wasn't particularly systematic. Tad didn't expect to find anything. But it made the job a little more interesting.

BEMGrep was plugged straight into the feed from the main array. Everything the radio-telescope heard (saw? Tad was never sure) BEMGrep heard too. If it heard anything, in theory it would let him know. Tad had never tested that module of code, though, because there never was going to be something interesting for BEMGrep to hear, just the boring hisses and clicks of the radio sky.

Most evenings, Tad tweaked the net, playing it classic Nirvana tracks. That evening, his work station hung. It locked solid. It didn't take Tad long to figure out that BEMGrep had generated a stack fault. It took him a while longer to realize that the only module that could have done that was the one he'd never tested: the one that let you know if BEMGrep had found an alien.

Tad hit keys in a frenzy until he got the feed up. He put it through the speakers. Over the hiss of space he heard what had crashed his net: DI-DADADA-DA-DA. There was a three-second pause and the signal repeated. DI-DADADADA-DA-DA.

Anastas Yakovlev took the dishes to the sink. The hot water was off again. It had been more off than on this year, ever since the summer when the local boilers were cleaned. Anastas filled a pot and set it on the stove to boil.

He found a bottle of vodka under the sink and a

glass in the cupboard. He poured himself a drink and settled back in his chair.

A rattling sound startled him. He looked round, saw nothing, drained the glass. He poured himself another. The rattling sound again. He thought he heard his name: "Dr Yakovlev." The pan was boiling. He went over to the sink and poured the hot water over the dishes. He heard the sound again, and his name, clearer. "Dr Yakovlev. Anastas Yakovlev." He went to the window. He heard the voice for sure. "Dr Yakovlev!" He threw the window open.

"Dr Yakovlev," the voice called out of the darkness of the street below, "it's me! Grigory!"

"Grigory! It's late."

"Your entryphone's not working. I have to see you, Dr Yakovlev. It's important."

"It's a little late for politics, Grigory," Anastas called down.

"Not politics. More important. Please!"

"More important than politics? A girl?"

"Dr Yakovlev," Grigory pleaded, "will you let me up?"

"Yes, yes," Anastas said testily.



Grigory Derevianko was tall and thin and his clothes were always a bit too small for him. His large brown eyes burned with a strange fever.

"What is it?" Anastas asked in the dark, chilly hall.

"Not yet," hissed Grigory. "Not here."

"Not that important, then?" Anastas laughed, "Perhaps you think my apartment is heated?"

"Dr Yakovlev!" Grigory sighed.

"All right, all right."

They climbed the stairs in silence.

Anastas showed Grigory in. "I'm sorry about the mess," he spread his hands, "I've just finished eating."

Grigory eyed the teetering piles of books and papers that threatened to bury the floor in a dusty avalanche.

"And I have an untidy mind! Tea?" Anastas continued, "It's a cold night." The young neo-Communist wouldn't touch vodka.

"Thank you."

"I have a thermos some... ah."

As Anastas busied himself, Grigory walked round in small circles and tapped his fingertips against his thighs.

"Tea, Grigory. There."

Grigory took the cup. "Dr Yakovlev..."

"Sit down, Grigory, sit down." Anastas sat down at the small dining table.

"Thank you..." Grigory remained standing. "You know Mariya..."

"Mashenka, yes," Anastas smiled, "at the university."

"She has been... we have been... monitoring the American data networks, you know..."

Anastas sipped his tea. "The secure ones?"

Grigory looked down. "Yes."

"For the challenge?" Anastas kept back a smile. Grigory was always so serious.

"Mariya... Dr Yakovlev, the Americans have detected an extra-terrestrial space ship," he blurted, "apparently –"

"What? What? Grigory, this isn't a prank? Not this late."

"Apparently they discovered it as it used Jupiter to brake and change course. It's headed for the inner solar system –"

"Grigory!"

"For Earth. The Americans have kept it quiet for... maybe at least a year. What Mariya found is still secret... we think maybe they're scared."

"Grigory!" Anastas rubbed his eyes. "Can it be? In my lifetime? I have lived to see it." He leapt up and hugged the young man, "Oh, I have lived to see it!"

Grigory pulled himself free of the hug. "We are going to release the news to embarrass the Yankee capitalist imperialists. We..." Grigory smiled grimly, "I thought you should know."

Anastas laughed. "In my lifetime! I have lived to see it."

"I must go. There's a press release. We've got to be ready..."

"Grigory! The most important event in history and you want to use it to embarrass the Americans!" Anastas shook his teacup at the young man.

"We want to expose the duplicity of the Capitalist so-called democracies."

"Ah, politics." Anastas rubbed his eyes. "It's late, Grigory."



It was some time before Anastas saw Grigory again.

The press release made no impact at all, at least not with the Russian media, nor in the foreign news roundup on television. He heard nothing on the BBC World Service, either, although Anastas regularly tuned in. A lifetime's habit kept him close to the radio, volume turned down low, ear against the loudspeaker grille, a feeling of traitorous guilt in his heart. Twenty years of freedom made no difference. He felt like a criminal, an enemy of the people, listening to the World Service news.

All the Russian papers ever mentioned, in the little paragraphs dwarfed by advertising and advertorial, was the bickering of the various spokespeople of the myriad political factions that made up what passed for government. They didn't mention a spaceship. They didn't mention the Rightists or the Nationalists or the neo-Communists or the neo-Nazis either, even though Anastas saw the marches, heard the chanted slogans – and hid under the table from the gun battles on the bad nights. The foreign news never mentioned that either. Maybe it didn't matter any more. Like the *mafyia*. No one mentioned them.

Once Anastas had gone out to use the phone in the street. Maybe he could reach Grigory at the university. The man in the shiny suit and dark sunglasses standing by the phone kiosk had told him it was out of order and he couldn't use it...

"What do you mean, out of order?" Someone was quite obviously making a call.

"Out of order, friend. Kaput, not working."

Anastas reached for the kiosk door but Shiny Suit blocked his way. "I said it's out of order, old man."

Anastas tried to look him up and down with contempt but he was too frightened to pull it off. The man was obviously *mafyia*.

"I can get you a portable phone. Digital. GSM. Best quality. No airtime. No bills. Good for, maybe, three months. A hundred thousand new roubles."

Anastas gaped in astonishment.

"Seventy-five thousand, then."

Anastas took a step back. "I just want to make a phone call," he said.

The man reached under his jacket as though for a gun. Anastas backed away further, too afraid to run. The man held out a mobile phone. "Here, you can use mine. One thousand new roubles."

Anastas shook his head.

He didn't return to his flat for some time. Maybe the man was there, outside the telephone kiosk. He wandered the streets of the Garden Ring looking for a phone. There weren't any more men in shiny suits, but none of the phones were working. Some of the kiosks had bullet holes. Some of them were smashed to pieces.

Shivering, aching with cold – he had gone out without a coat – he returned to his flat much later.



Grigory threw gravel up at his window again later that month. Anastas was ready. He threw up the window. "Grigory!" he called.

There was no answer, though Anastas could make out a pale face in the darkness. "Grigory?"

He went down to the front door. He stood a while looking at the handle. There was a shadow behind the frosted-glass panes of the door. Anastas remembered the *mafyia* man, the man in the shiny suit. He licked his lips. He looked at the handle. It was cold in the hall. It was colder outside, snow piled up and frozen to ice. A narrow lane was cleared in the middle of the main roads. Royal roads for the Rolls-Royces of the *nouveaux riches* (not so *nouveaux* any more) and the gangsters.

Anastas looked at the handle. He was an old man, he had nothing of value. They couldn't want anything of him. He hadn't even used their phone. He reached out and opened the door.

Grigory was standing on the threshold hunched, his loose coat open to the cold night air. His chin was roughened with a few days' stubble and he had a black eye.

"Grigory!"

Grigory touched a finger to his lips.

Anastas stood aside and let the young man in. "Grigory, what's happened to you?"

Grigory said nothing until the street door was closed. "Fascist bastards!" He touched his eye.

"Who?" Anastas was bewildered.

"The neo-Nazis. Scum."

Anastas nodded, said nothing.

"I... I'd like some tea, if..."

"Of course, Grigory. Come on up."



Grigory clutched the tea in both hands. Anastas had made it syrupy with sugar. It wasn't too hot. Grigory gulped the tea thirstily.

"Here," Anastas held out a damp flannel, "I ran it under the cold tap. For your eye."

"No, no. I'm all right, really."

"It'll help the swelling. I've had my share of fights. My wife..."

Grigory almost smiled. He took the flannel. "Thank you, Dr Yakovlev."

"Anastas. I'm Anastas," he frowned at the young man, "though maybe you'd rather call me comrade."

"No, Anastas, thank you."

Anastas sat down opposite the young man. He traced a crack on the Formica tabletop.

"I was coming to see you," Grigory said. "I used the metro. Bad mistake. The *mafyia* run the whole thing now. Some fascists got me on the Circle line." Grigory touched his eye again. "I got away. Look, Dr Ya– Anastas, they might've followed me. They might come after you."

"I'm not afraid."

"Not afraid! The *mafyia* runs this whole district!"

"Grigory, why were you coming to see me?"

Grigory stared at the old man. "The spaceship–"

"The extra-terrestrial spaceship?" Anastas didn't try to hide the excitement in his voice.

"It hasn't responded to any signals," Grigory continued, "It's too expensive for the Capitalist states to send up a probe and take a look." Grigory shook his head slowly. "No one is interested, Anastas. The Americans are going to blow it out of the sky when it gets too close to Earth."

"No!"

"There's an environmental newsgroup on the 'net protesting the use of nuclear weapons close to Earth." Grigory's voice was flat. "I don't know how they heard... Nothing else. In six months' time it'll be as if nothing happened."

"No. No. I don't believe it. No."

Grigory looked intently at the old man. Fire smouldered behind his eyes. "I'm sorry, Anastas. I'm sorry."

"Sorry!" Anastas thumped the table, spilling tea. "Sorry!" he shouted. "The boy's sorry!"

Grigory looked down. He rolled the damp flannel over one hand and then the other. He didn't say anything.

Anastas caught his breath. "Grigory," he spoke quietly, harshly, almost a whisper, "I'm sorry. Forgive me. The... I can't believe the Americans would..."

Grigory folded the flannel as small as it would go. He studied it intently.

"Tell me. Tell me everything about the spaceship, Grigory. Everything you know."

"Oh! Anastas!"

"Here, look," Anastas fished a biro from his pocket. "I'll make some notes. I've got some paper here, somewhere..." He patted his pockets. "Talk slowly, mind. It's many years since I've been a student." He smiled, but Grigory saw a tear trickle down his nose.

"Anastas..."

"Here!" Anastas unfolded a wrinkled sheet of typing paper. "This is fine." He sniffled. "Tell me everything."

Grigory looked down again and took a deep breath. "About two years ago," he began, "I don't know exactly when, an American graduate student at Arecibo detected a signal in the vicinity of Jupiter. A signal he took to be from an alien intelligence. The student made the mistake of reporting it to his superiors. The Americans moved quickly to hush up the entire thing. By the end of the first day it was all classified."

Anastas looked up from his piece of paper. "What was the signal? Do you know what it was?"

Grigory nodded. "There's a sample on the Pentagon's SecurNet. I heard it once. Mashenka was playing it to everyone. Uh..." Grigory was blushing. Even the tips of his ears were red, "It went DI-DADADADA-DA-DA. Don't you think it sounds like –?"

"Troika!" Anastas was staring right at him. "There was a three-second pause then it started up again." He hummed the famous theme from Prokofiev's Classical symphony.

Grigory stared at him open-mouthed.

"Grigory," said Anastas, "they've come back."

"What? Who's come back?"

"We must tell the Americans."

"Tell the Americans what? Why? What's all this about?"

"Oh. Ah." Anastas smiled wanly. "You wouldn't know. Ah. Excuse me." Anastas stood up and went over to the sink.

Grigory turned around in his chair. "Anastas, what is all this?"

Anastas retrieved the bottle of vodka and poured himself a large glass. He drained it and poured himself another. "I'm sorry," he said as he sat down again.

Grigory wrinkled his nose.

Anastas sipped his vodka. "Please listen. I have much to say."

Grigory nodded, speechless.

"On the morning of June 30 1908 a –"

"I know," said Grigory, "a comet –"

"An extraterrestrial spacecraft entered the Earth's atmosphere –"

"What?!"

"...High above the Indian Ocean. Something – its guidance systems? – malfunctioned. The crew kept it airborne as long as they could. I think they were trying to ditch in the Arctic circle, far away from civilization. They didn't make it. At 7.17 AM the spaceship's propulsion system exploded above the Central Siberian Plateau. The command module crashed about 60km north of Vanavara."

"No," said Grigory. "This is fantastic."

"Fantastic? I was a young scientist on the team that recovered the wreck in the spring of 1964."

Grigory shook his head. He squinted at the old man. "And these extraterrestrials have come back for their wreckage?"

"No," said Anastas, indignant. "The *Kosmos* has returned. We built a spaceship. The *Kosmos*. It was launched, in great secrecy, from Space City on 7th November 1972. A crew of three, heroes of the Soviet Union, were put aboard already in hibernation..."

"Hibernation?"

"Yuri Sokolov, Viktor Perovskaya, Arkady Bochkarev. Arkady was a good friend, but I wasn't allowed to the launch." Anastas looked down. He turned the piece of paper over. "They are back. Troika is the call signal. We were going to tell the Americans it was a probe returning from the outer planets. Forty-five years. So much has changed."

"You didn't expect...?"

"We didn't know. We barely understood what we were building."

Grigory looked at the old man, searching his face. "We must make an announcement. This is a great day for Soviet science."

"Announcement to whom?" Anastas asked bleakly. "To the government? Do you think they can stop the Americans shooting the *Kosmos* down?"

Grigory looked down. "The people..."

Anastas laughed without humour. "The people? Will they rise up? Will they demand our cosmonauts be allowed to land unmolested? Will they build and run the transmitters to revive the *Kosmos*'s crew and guide the ship down?"

Grigory shook his head, tried to shake the words out of his ears. "Anastas! The people must know! Russian cosmonauts have been to the stars!"

"Will they care? Does the knowledge bring prosperity? Will it make them rich?"

"You are a cynic," Grigory mumbled.

"I am an old man," Anastas replied. "I am far too old for illusions. If we want the *Kosmos* safely down, the Americans are the only ones who can help us."

"Will they listen?"

"I can only try. My friends are up there," he gestured out of the window, "I am responsible. I must try."

"I will help," said Grigory.

"No, the neo-Nazis..."

"I will help. It's a long walk to Ulitsa Chaikovskovo."

"I can take the metro."

Grigory laughed. "You can try. The fascists are closing the network tonight."

Anastas looked at the young man in puzzlement.

"They think they'll be getting popular support. The *mafyia*'s backing them."

"Grigory, what's going on?"

"Revolution? Civil war? What do you want to call it? The opening shots."

Anastas put his hands over his eyes. "You...?"

"We are ready. We'll be at the barricades."



The sky had cleared. The stars were out, bright and sharp in the frosty air. A fingernail of waning moon couched on the western horizon. The city was dark. Even the lights in front of the Kremlin were out. In the dark, Anastas didn't recognize the city at all. He saw imps and vampires and malign spirits scuttle back into the darkest shadows of doorways. He felt the city itself close around him, whispering its secret plots.

Grigory led the way. He took them to the ring road. ("It's a longer walk, but there's less ice. Maybe the streetlights are on there.") The streetlights weren't on, but Grigory was sure-footed nevertheless. He never once slipped on the ice, not even when Anastas lost his footing and would have fallen but for the young man's support.

The ring road was eerily quiet. Anastas heard nothing but his own laboured breathing and the scrunch-scrunch of frozen snow under their boots. Sometimes when he stopped to catch his breath he heard the glassy death of an icicle fallen from a streetlight or a gutter.

"It's getting warmer," he reassured himself, even though his feet ached and he couldn't feel his fingers in his gloves.

Grigory stopped, patient, understanding. "Maybe

spring is coming at last."

Anastas coughed and felt the cold air jab into his lungs. "It's so quiet. No cars, even here. It's as though everyone has left." Moscow had become a city of the dead. Watchful, still, empty.

Grigory shrugged in the darkness. He sighed moistly. He was wheezing in the cold. "Only the *mafyia* can afford cars now. And they are getting ready for the morning." He coughed: a hard cracking sound that made Anastas start. "Are you okay? We're almost there now."

Anastas stretched, then wrapped his arms around himself. "I'm fine, Grigory. Let's go."



They saw the glow of lights over the American embassy before they heard the puttering throb of the portable generators. The sound soon filled the air, like the city's heart beating its last in the darkness and decay. The road, an artery, was clogged with queuing humanity. Anastas saw this and wept for his country. The tears burnt his face in the cold.

"So many," Grigory whispered.

"We have failed," said Anastas. "We have been to the stars and we have failed nevertheless."

"In the morning, at the barricades, we will show the world!" In the cold air Grigory's enthusiasm sounded hollow.

Anastas sighed. "Tell them what we have achieved, if they will listen."

"I'll stay with you for now. It'll be a long wait."



The American official smiled and glanced at the interpreter. "They say you understand English," she said in a surprisingly deep voice.

"I am a little rusted," Anastas replied, "but I am remembering much."

"I confess, Dr Yakovlev, I was sceptical about your claims. The situation in your country... you understand. However, it appears my superiors had better judgement." The official looked down, then looked up and smiled. "The codes you gave us worked. We are monitoring telemetry from the *Kosmos*. The crew are being revived –"

"Oh! Oh!" Anastas smiled. "I have no words!"

The official nodded curtly. "I don't know how to... Telemetry is reporting only two crew members. Perhaps you could...?"

"Only two? I do not understand. We sent three." Then, "Oh, no!" he said in Russian.

"I'm sorry?" the official said.

"We sent three. One was a close friend. There may have been a problem. An accident."

The woman nodded. "Perhaps telemetry is malfunctioning."

"As you say," agreed Anastas without heart.

They stood in silence. Every now and then the American woman glanced over Anastas's head at the clock. Anastas stared stonily ahead. He remembered the time he and his wife and Arkady and Fanya – the pilot's exotic girlfriend – spent a month one glorious summer at Odessa. The project was going well. They had been working flat out and they had earned the holiday. Arkady was well connected in the Party, but Anastas wasn't sure how he'd managed to swing the guest house, and Arkady wasn't telling.

They spent the days on a private Party beach (Anastas could still feel the decadent thrill). They drank beer like water and vodka like beer. When news came that the flight had been approved, Arkady produced some real French champagne. Anastas had almost fainted.

They drank champagne and chased it with vodka. They toasted the project, the *Kosmos*, each other.

"Another one of your stupid rockets," his wife taunted.

"Not a rocket," Anastas replied enigmatically.

Arkady drained his glass. "But stupid, eh?" He laughed and clapped Anastas round the shoulders. "Stupid, all right!" He laughed his loud laugh and they all laughed with him.

"Stupid," Anastas said.

"I'm sorry. I didn't catch that," the American official said.

"Nothing... I am thinking of my friend."

"I – excuse me." An aide came into the room and whispered something in the official's ear. She nodded once and dismissed him with a wave. It occurred to Anastas that she had the bearing of a high-ranking KGB officer. She smiled slyly at him as if reading his thoughts. Anastas blushed.

"Dr Yakovlev," she said, "I think they're ready for us."

"Ready?"

"Telemetry reports two successful revivals." The official gestured to the door. "Through there, Doctor."

Two uniformed guards snapped to attention as they stepped into the corridor. Not for the first time Anastas was reminded that he was a prisoner here.

"We are going where?" he asked.

"To our communications centre. Your friends will be expecting to speak to a Russian. Left here, Doctor."

They turned down a short corridor and through another guarded door. They found themselves in a control centre. Large screens, far across the hangar of a room, showed graphics of the *Kosmos*'s flight path, and, to Anastas's astonishment, an external view of the vessel, taken, he guessed, by the Hubble, or a spy satellite turned out to space. The little silver cylinder was lonely among the stars. A central screen was full of silent snow.

Someone turned and noticed the party. Technicians stood up from their consoles and applauded.

"What is this?" asked Anastas.

"They are applauding you," the official said, and directed a professional smile at the room.

"Me?" Anastas blushed and looked down.

"Wave," the official suggested.

"Wave?"

"Your hand. Wave. But make it quick."

Anastas raised his hand. The technicians cheered and raised their hands in victory salutes. A crackling recording of the old Soviet national anthem exploded over the public address system. The technicians whooped. Anastas found himself standing straighter.

"Kids," the official said, "it doesn't mean anything to them."

"It means something to you," Anastas said.

"My father was betrayed by Aldritch Ames."

The music cut off. Some commissar had found out where it was coming from.

"Let's go," the official said, tapping Anastas on the small of his back. He gave the technicians one last wave and hurried along.

The communications centre wasn't even a proper room. It was two flimsy walls enclosing a corner of mission control. An array of bright lights hung over it on a frame suspended from the ceiling. More guards waited outside the door. One was seated at a television screen.

The official gestured to the translator who nodded, sat down beside the guard and put a headset on. He smiled up at Anastas.

"Mr Oblomov will be monitoring your conversations with the cosmonauts, Dr Yakovlev." The official indicated the translator.

Anastas nodded. This was familiar enough. The official pushed open the door of the communication centre. "Are you CIA?" he whispered in Russian as he approached.

"No," the official replied in English, "I'm with NASA." She paused. "Touché, Dr Yakovlev. I think we understand one another. Put the headset on, or you won't hear a thing."

"Thank you." The official stepped aside and Anastas walked into the room.



The first thing he saw was a gilded profile of Lenin in bas-relief. It hung in the centre of the rear wall which was draped with heavy red-velvet curtains. Anastas turned to the official, but she had closed the door. Lenin was directly lit by a spotlight on the frame above. His solemn profile glittered with inappropriate gaudiness.

On the wall facing Lenin there was a large TV screen, like the one in mission control, filled with static. It was flanked by cameras. Between the screen and Lenin was a heavy wooden desk, topped with red leather. There was a small bronze bust of Karl Marx on the desk, next to a shining wooden in-tray filled with official-looking papers. Anastas's name was spelled out in Cyrillic on a nameplate on the desk. Anastas rubbed his eyes. When he looked again, the room was still there.

He touched the desk. He ran his fingers over the polished surface. He turned full circle, taking in the room, his mouth open in wonder. He sat down at the desk. A computer monitor was recessed into the desktop. It was displaying an annotated graphic of the *Kosmos*'s flight path. A headset hung from the edge of the desk. Anastas put it on gingerly. He coughed and spoke in to the microphone. "Do you hear me?" he asked.

"We hear you," the translator replied. "Please speak in Russian, Dr Yakovlev."

Anastas shook his head slowly. He gazed at Karl Marx on his desk. Marx gazed back solemnly over his flowing beard. "What is all this?" Anastas asked.

The official replied. "Your cosmonauts are expecting to return to the Soviet Union."

"The Soviet Union is dead. It is history. They will know soon enough."

"Tell me, Doctor," she said, "how is your spaceship propelled?"

"In real space? It uses an ion drive."

"How is the drive powered, Doctor?"

"By a nuclear reactor... oh. You are afraid. They are not fanatics, you know."

"Their country has gone. They have the most powerful piece of technology in the solar system. Dr Yakovlev, they don't have to be fanatics."

"I won't lie to my colleagues."

The official sighed. "You should know that we are targeting *Kosmos* with an X-ray laser. I'm sure the structure will survive a short burst. But the crew..."

"Enough!" shouted Anastas. "Arkady, forgive me," he whispered.

"We're putting you on-line now."

Anastas nodded to Karl Marx. "You were right, you know. They will destroy themselves. But they destroyed us first." He shook his head. "Space City to *Kosmos*, Space City to *Kosmos*. If you can hear my signal, please respond. Space City to *Kosmos*."

"There is a ten-minute delay," the translator said. "We will repeat your broadcast until they respond."

Anastas waited. His headphones crackled with static. There was a clock display in the corner of the screen, but it didn't seem to be moving. He found he was holding his breath. He had to force himself to breathe properly.

Then the screen cleared.

The picture was noisy and it rippled with static, but there was Arkady, looking no older than the day he left.

"Anastas Ivanovich, is that you? There's about a ten-minute delay, so I shouldn't be asking stupid questions. Anastas! We have come back. Here is Yuri. Viktor..."

Yuri leaned towards the camera, his bald head glistening, "Viktor didn't survive hibernation. Something went wrong."

"We had to dispose of the body in flight. His family..."

Yuri leaned into the picture again, "Anastas! You wouldn't believe what we have seen! There are other races. The galaxy is inhabited!"

"It's incredible. Oh Anastas! I wish you had seen it, my friend."

"Everywhere we went," Yuri said, "the revolution had triumphed! Communism. Pure, just Communism! Everywhere!"

"Anastas, how long have we been away? You look much older. It is you, isn't it? How long? Twenty years? More? What of my family? My mother? And Fanya? How is Fanya?"

Anastas took the headset off. "Too long, comrades," he said. He dried his eyes and put the headset back on. "Arkady, Yuri, welcome home."



Lilith Moon is the pseudonym of a new writer who lives in Bromley, Kent, and who contributed a debut story, "The Long Run," to *Interzone* 93.

Under the mOOns of Jizma

(a Scientific Romance)

Michael Andre-Driussi

Foreword

To the Reader of this Work:

In submitting Doctor Lee's curious manuscript to you, I believe a few notes are in order. First of all, even though my uncle Doctor Lee has been pronounced legally deceased as of last year, I cannot be certain that he will not visit me tomorrow. Secondly, among my inheritance from him was a thick sheaf of hand-written pages, un-numbered, and varying greatly in legibility. So while I am not, strictly speaking, the author of this tale, it would be dishonest of me to claim that I was not its editor, arranging it into the form you have before you now.

Yours very sincerely,

Norm L. Bean (1912)

Narrator's prologue

I am old, rendered ancient beyond my years by the curious adventures I am about to relate. Looking at my withered frame you would be hard pressed to believe that I am only nine and thirty years – I might easily pass for a man twice that age.

I was born in 1857, heir to a modest plantation in Virginia. My inheritance was destroyed before my tenth year by the War, yet my family's pride and sacrifice sent me to Harvard. I graduated in 1879 with a few awards for pistol marksmanship and a degree in Chemistry, following in the footsteps of my late father, a gentleman-scientist of the old school. Upon returning to my ancestral home I was struck with a new appreciation of how much had been lost, and I renewed my determination to rebuild the family fortune.

Eight years went by, during which I obtained a licence and became Pharmacist in a town forgotten by the Reconstruction. My only consolation was the regular correspondence with my college chum Teddy, who was first in New York City, then in the Dakota territory where he sought solace for a few years after losing his wife and his mother, then in New York again. Both of us longed for excitement and felt that life was passing us by – the railroads had already reached the Far West, signalling that the last Heroic Age was almost over.

But then in 1887 I received the call to adventure. My employer, Mr Bradly Martin, had determined in the course of reading a few volumes of quaint and curious lore that the Age of Alcohol was nearly over and that a brand-new world of soft drinks, women's suffrage and free love was about to dawn.

"Look at Pemberton down in Atlanta," he said. "Coca-cola. Folks down there going crazy for it. I'm telling you, Will, it's going to get even bigger. Then there's Alderton out there in Waco, Texas, calls his concoction 'Doctor Pepper.' Hell, I *know* Doc Pepper – he prefers prune juice. You got the Women's Christian Temperance Union over in Ohio pushing for an end to alcohol, and you know what? They're going to win. But people have to drink something, so they'll come in here for a soda. We'll replace the saloons, get it?

"But we need something special, something new. Root beer just ain't going to cut it. We need a 'secret ingredient.' Ol' Pemberton is probably using a mite of cocaine in his drink, gives a body a healthy zip. Even the Brits are getting in on this – look at Schweppes and their tonic water, that's got quinine – malaria medicine. We need something unique, and the key is hidden somewhere in South America. Like the coca plant. The Amazon jungle must be overflowing with undiscovered treasures – who knows what secrets died with the Mayans and the Incas? Ah, if I were only younger, I'd set out for adventure to make my fortune..."

Wlm. Lee (1896)

My Adventure Begins

The mighty Amazon, Father of all Rivers, snaking through a colossal jungle so dark-green as to be almost

black. At Belém I caught a steamboat heading upriver. I could feel the heat closing in every time the sun rose, and the equatorial humidity made the air so thick I thought I might swim in it. I felt as though, instead of going to the centre of a continent, I were about to set off for another world entirely. I badly missed Teddy, sorry that he could not join me on this trip.

Nearly a week later I arrived at Manaus, in the heart of the jungle. It is the only major city within 600 miles and was experiencing an economic boom in wild-rubber. That was my cover story – should anybody ask, I was there to harvest rubber; but the place was so full of adventurers and fortune-hunters that I felt I could pass amongst them unnoticed.

My Portuguese was even worse than my Spanish, however, so I sought out a physician in the hopes that his English (or Latin, should it come to that) would prove sufficient for communication. As luck would have it, I found a Doctor Monygham.

"I would guess, *senhor*," he said, after I had introduced myself, "that you have not come to Manaus for the *borracha*, the rubber, eh? You search instead for the medicine, do you not?"

My surprise must have been immediately evident, since he laughed out loud.

"How could you...?" I asked.

"You come from a good family," he explained. "Not like these desperados. You are a man of science, like me. But most important, you lack the gleam of gold in your eye. Besides, you are not working for Madame Sosostris."

"'Sosostris'?" The name sounded vaguely familiar. I thought of Mr Martin Bradly's small library.

"*Não tem importancia*, even if you are, I tell you the same thing. Here, take the easy one and go back home. There is a vine called by the savages 'Yage' or 'Ayuahuaska'; our term is *bannisteria caapi*. It is a powerful narcotic – the medicine men use it for visions. Who knows? It may be the next morphine. Dried samples are totally inert, so take some vine clippings back to your home and plant them."

"You said that was the easy one. What else is there?"

"The hard one. It is like chasing a ghost..."

"What is it?"

The doctor sighed. "There is a legend that far to the south of here there is an old medicine woman called Lupita. She lives in a cave and has ancient knowledge. But this is only a legend."

"I choose the hard way," I said. "I must find Lupita."

"But remember Ponce de Leon," said the doctor. "He too chased after a legend, and paid for it with his life."

"Schliemann found Troy nearly 20 years ago, doctor, but until that time it was thought to be only legendary as well. Can you help me find Lupita?"

"Yes, I will do what I can," he said. "It will cost money, but it will cost more than that, much more." From a desk drawer he withdrew a large pair of callipers. "I always ask leave, in the interests of science, to measure the crania of those going out there..."

"And when they come back, too?"

"Oh, I never see them," he said. "Besides, the changes take place inside, you know." He smiled, as if at some quiet joke.

After jotting down the measurements, he advised me to go back to the hotel and promised to send someone for me in a few days.

At the Heart of Darkness

My guide was dead, I was nearly out of bullets, and the nameless jungle savages were gaining on me. Blindly I crashed through the overgrowth, seeking higher ground to make my last stand. As I scrambled up the steep slope of a hill, arrows began to rain down around me, so when a cave mouth appeared I gratefully dove into it. Frantically I reloaded my S&W Safety Hammerless revolver for the last time and waited for the attack. The longest minutes of my life went by, but the attack didn't come.

I heard a scuffling sound in the cave behind me and turned to see a weird, macabre sight. There was a tripod filled with something that gave off an eerie phosphorescent glow, and beside this was some kind of couch with a bundle of rags upon it. Glancing around I noticed at least a dozen bundles of honeycomb which had obviously been brought here by others, and I surmised that this chamber must be some sort of temple or shrine.

After I had taken a few steps closer I realized that the "rags" I had seen were actually the mummified remains of a woman lying upon the couch, arms and legs akimbo. The corpse was naked except for some elaborate jewellery, and her shrivelled lips exposed long yellow canines – could this be "Lupita," the little she-wolf?

I turned to examine the glowing powder more closely. As I reached in to pick some up, the pile shifted and I suddenly found a foot-long centipede wrapped around my arm, its head in my fist, its tail whipping around searching for purchase.

When the stinger struck home there was a moment of pain followed by a wave of heat spreading from my arm throughout my body. I threw the centipede away from me and noticed a few others already scurrying around. Despite this, a sense of delicious dreaminess overcame me, and my muscles relaxed. Unable to stand, I tried to sit upon the couch but ended up sprawling onto it. Even face to face with the grinning horror of Lupita I could do nothing but look away toward the cave mouth. I felt my heartbeat slow. The day went by in what seemed to be only a few minutes; the night went by even faster as my heartbeat continued to slow until finally, sometime before dawn, it stopped altogether. For a moment I stood outside my body, looking down upon it as if from a vantage point on the ceiling. Then there was an instant of extreme cold and utter darkness.

The Master Mind of Jizma

I must have closed my eyes involuntarily during the transition through the ether, for when I opened them I was lying naked and prone on the cold tiled floor of a small room. A few yards away were the corpses of a boy and girl, both red-skinned and lacking craniums. A hellish baboon-like creature with six limbs seemed to be in the process of devouring their exposed brains, while standing over me with a mystified expression was the strangest looking individual I had ever seen, a man as red as an Indian and as shrivelled as Methuselah.

A small, dirty window high up let in a bit of weak

light, but the room was well lit by unearthly bars of light set in the ceiling. The man, who wore a blood-stained apron like that of a butcher, spoke to me in an unintelligible language that sounded for all the world like the various noises that insects make. I watched in horror as the baboon-thing scooped out the brains of first one corpse, then the other, dropping them to lie upon the filthy floor. The man continued trying to communicate with me, shifting into a variety of languages that sounded vaguely like Arabic or Greek. Finally he said, "*Sprechen Sie Deutsch?*"

"No," I responded, sitting up. "I speak English."

His eyes lit up. The ghoul beside him noticed me for the first time and bared its prodigious teeth at me.

"Ah, English," said the man, gesturing the creature to step aside. "Very like German, yes? Me, Herr Doctor Benway," he thumped his chest. "This" – he gestured to the ghoul – "is mine assistant, Hovan." The beast touched its forehead and bowed. "And *du?* Who are you?"

"I am William Lee."

"*Wiggle'em Lie?*"

"No, William Lee."

"Too hard. I call you Will," he said. "You mind I work?" I had no answer, so he squatted down and picked up the boy's brain. "Very good. Now please to tell me where from you come?"

"I am from Virginia," I said.

"Va-jinya, Va-jinya," he mused as he put the brain into the girl's body and drove a strange silver instrument up the nostril of the corpse. "No, I have never heard of that place." He twiddled the instrument around several times, then turned to re-attach the cranium with what appeared to be a kind of glue.

"It is in America," I offered.

"Never heard of that place either. No matter, many places I know not. So, Will, what can I do you for?" When I failed to answer, he added, "And how did you manage to get in through the locked door, anyway?"

"I woke up here."

"The room was empty before, and the door is still locked," he said as he performed the same operation on the other corpse. "What, are you some kind of *gigim?* A ghost?" He looked up in surprise. "Is that what your name is, Will Gigim?"

"No, I am not a ghost – at least, I don't think I am."

"Well you look pale enough to be a *gigim*," he said, continuing at his labour. "Maybe you are sick. Or maybe you just need a new body. I'd have to charge you full-price, since the resale value of the one you have now would be virtually nil – except as a curiosity, perhaps."

"No," I said. "I am happy with the body I have now."

After resealing the second skull, he stood up and stretched. "Nurse, sew them up, revive them, and get them out of here. Our rental time runs out. Meet us back at the house when you are through." To me he said, "Come along." He unlocked the door. "We can look among new bodies for you, if nothing else."

I hesitated.

"Surely you cannot stay here," he said. "And where else do you have to go?"

There was truth in what he said, so I followed him into a cavernous room bustling with well-armed red men and women all scantily clad with leather harnesses. The women were as willowy and lissome as adolescent girls. I hid my nakedness until my patron lent me his apron to wear.

We boarded a bullet-shaped vehicle that apparently operates on the pneumatic principle, travelling in excess of 100 miles per hour to emerge in another cavernous room roughly 45 minutes later. Following Benway's example, I leapt over a little hurdle and jogged behind him up a ramp spiralling to the surface where a stunning vision stopped me in my tracks: for there was the Moon, but it was too small; and even as I grappled with this intelligence, another moon, even smaller, shot across the sky.

"Where is this place?" I ejaculated, bewildered by the slender towers and the eggshell domes.

"Why, Annexia, of course," said Benway. "Lesser Freedonia."

"What planet?"

"*Planet?!*" cried Benway. "Do not become spooky on me, Will Gigim. This is planet Jizma, fourth from the Sun."

Linn of Mavrosia

I became a part of Benway's mansion menagerie, but once I exhibited my pharmaceutical knowledge I was graduated to staff. The above-ground structure was simple and slightly ruinous; the subterranean chambers held a few dozen bodies heaped about in disarray, preserved by an exotic embalming fluid the composition of which was known only to the Master Mind himself.

Days ran into weeks, weeks into months, as day by day I laboured at the side of Benway, and more and more the old surgeon took me into his confidence, imparting to me the secrets of his skill and his profession. I quickly learned the Jizmatic language, which seems remarkably similar to ancient Greek, but since Hovan lacked the vocal chords necessary for speech I had no one to talk to or confide in.

One day a remarkable creature came to the mansion, a talking *gaidaros* or Jizmatic ass that introduced itself as "Linn" and asked to have audience with Benway. At their meeting, the gold-coloured gaidaros abased itself before Benway, begging for its former body and shedding copious tears. It was heartbreaking, and I immediately sided with Linn, wondering which of the svelte corpses in the chambers beneath us was hers.

Benway was not moved. "Linn, this was the punishment meted out to you by Ayssa, Empress of Mavrosia. You should not have thwarted Her, or thought that you could do so with impunity. Your attractive body, which She coveted, was taken from you and now you reside in the body of an ass until the end of your days several centuries hence, or until such time as Ayssa commutes your sentence." He paused for a moment, chin in hand. "In the unlikely event that She does grant you such a mercy, you would want to be close at hand in order to quickly regain your old shell. To help you in this, I offer to take you into my stable as a beast of burden, but heed this warning: do not speak to me again of betraying the desires of Ayssa, or I shall turn you out into the world to fend for yourself."

In this manner Linn came to be my constant companion. Her body was not among those in our cata-

combs, but was kept by the fearful and despotic Ayssa, Queen of a far-off land. In the weeks that followed I had seen much of Linn and in our daily intercourse there had been revealed to me little by little the wondrous beauties of her soul, until at last I no longer saw the dumb face of a donkey when I looked upon her, but a sweet mind peering out through those deep brown eyes. I resolved to secretly transplant that brain into the hebetic body of her choice, but when I broached the subject she was horrified and professed to wanting no body other than the one she was born with. I vowed to accomplish this seemingly impossible task.

Across the Floors of Seas Long Dead

There was a great deal of confusion in the aftermath of the raid. Benway was captured or fled for parts unknown, his mansion laboratory was in flames, and Linn and I were out on the streets of lesser Annexia without a roof over our heads, nor any money. All we had, in fact, aside from my harness and short sword, were a few scalpels and a small pot of the copper-coloured skin paint which, when applied to my pale skin, allowed me to pass as a red Jizmatic.

It seemed like an opportune time to set out for Mavrosia, but we needed provisions for such an arduous trek across the wastelands. Manual labour did not offer enough money, nor could I find any use for my new talents as surgeon since I knew nobody in the sprawling metropolis outside of the mansion. We soon hit upon a form of streetside theatre, playing upon Linn's unusual talents, and became minstrels for a few weeks until we had scraped together enough money to outfit ourselves. And then we set out.

Although there was a great deal of hardship out on the desolate plains, those were perhaps the happiest of my days on Jizma. As we walked side by side, Linn told me of Jizma, its history and peoples, thus filling in my sketchy knowledge.

"Jizma has been settled by different races from different stars throughout the aeons. The first to arrive were the black-skinned Rmoahals, who call themselves the 'First Born' of Jizma. Their place of origin is unknown, either lost to the sands of time or a secret guarded by death. Next came the golden Draconians and the pale Arians."

"Arians?" I asked, my blood warming.

"Yes, from Aries. When I first saw you, I supposed you might be one of them, returned from a nearly forgotten time, since they have been extinct for hundreds of thousands of years. Of course, now I believe your story, that you come from the planet Pyosis."

"Tell me of the Arians," I pressed. "How did they come to die off?"

"Legends say that they were not originally so ghost-like in complexion, they were more tan or brown. A terrible war was fought and lost, and the Arians were driven into deep caves while their continent was locked in an ice-age. This was in that remote time before the oceans dried up.

"Deep in these caves, the Arians had so little food that they had to resort to cannibalism, which is horror enough in itself, but in their case was even worse – since the first generation had been contaminated with *taqa*, or glowing-energy-poison, by eating this poisoned flesh they cursed themselves. They practised unholy rites, as well, and developed strange new sorceries – including language. When at last they emerged from their ice-bound caves, they were pale from lack of sunlight and crazed from their poisons. They conquered all of Jizma."

"Then what happened?"

"As a last-ditch effort, the First Born and the Draconians unleashed the dreaded *ak-karu*, green newtmen of Puuntango [our Venus]. These terrible creatures killed indiscriminately, exterminating the Arians and driving all the others into the high-walled cities we still live in. The modern Jizmatic race of red men arose from the co-mingling of survivor races."

"How were the ak-karu halted?"

"The seas dried up," said Linn, flicking her head around to indicate the dry sea bed around us. "The newtmen are amphibious and need water to birth their young. The adults are slower on land, so the fighting is more evenly matched."

"Are they oviparous, like the red men?" I asked.

"'Oviparous'? I suppose you could call the Jizmatic method something like that, since it does take place outside of the body. We usually call it *efevresis*."

We ran out of food with one-third of the way left ahead of us. Linn was able to eke out some sustenance from the ochre lichen that was always underfoot, but I began to starve. We began resting during the heat of the day and travelling at night to conserve energy, but on the third such evening I fell and had a difficult time getting up again.

"Will, please ride me," said Linn. "Let me carry you."

"No, Linn," I mumbled. "I can't do that."

"Oh 'Iron Will,' you must bend a little," Linn continued, butting my arm with her nose. "The packs are empty now, your weight would not be so great."

"But it would be so degrading for you, treating you like an animal..."

"Think of how often I have relied upon your arms. Now is the time to rely upon my legs to get us through this rough spot."

At last I relented and mounted the finest golden ass of Jizma, and then, having done so, I nearly shed a tear for Linn's incomparable sense of self-sacrifice before I passed out from exhaustion.

Prisoners of the Green Jizmatics

The firearms of Jizma are wondrous marvels of advanced technology. Rather than having a metallic cartridge case, the bullet is embedded in a solid cake of propellant which is consumed when the bullet is fired. Reloading is quick and easy and, since there is no ejection port, the weapon is completely sealed against the elements. The bullets themselves are of small calibre, making weapon-recoil slight, but they are imbued with the explosive power of taqa, lending man-stopping power to a diminutive slug.

Thus, there was no contest when we found ourselves looking down the wrong end of a dozen rifles after quenching our thirst at an oasis. We surrendered to the newtmen. Linn and I were separated and the party moved off across the desert at a gallop

toward a hill on the horizon.

It so happened that this hill had for its crown the ruins of an ancient sea-port. As we neared the plaza of the dead city my presence was discovered and we were immediately surrounded by several dozen of the creatures, who seemed anxious to pluck me from my seat behind my guard. A word from the leader stilled their clamour and we proceeded at a trot across the plaza to the entrance of a palace that was magnificent even in death.

The edifice was low but covered an enormous area. It was constructed of white marble inlaid with gold and brilliant stones which sparkled in the sunlight. The entrance was some hundred feet in width, and a gentle incline to the second floor opened onto an enormous chamber encircled by galleries. On the floor of this chamber were assembled about 40 or 50 male green Jizmatics around the steps of a dais covered with Aztec mosaics. Murals indicated that this once-proud city had been built by the ancient Arians, yet now it was merely a temporary shelter for nomadic tribes and the air was cloyed with a sweet evil substance like decayed honey.

On the platform itself squatted an enormous green warrior festooned with metal ornaments, gay-coloured feathers and beautifully wrought leather trappings. His lips were thin and purple-blue, slightly beaked like those of a snapping turtle, and his eyes were blank with insect calm. From his shoulders hung a short cape of white fur lined with brilliant scarlet silk.

The ideas of humour among the green men of Jizma are widely at variance with our concepts, as I was about to learn. The death agonies of a comrade are, to these strange creatures, cause of the wildest hilarity, while their main form of amusement is to inflict death upon their prisoners of war in various ingenious and horrible ways. Their laughter signifies torture, suffering and death.

A guard brought out a pale white boy, the sight of which caused a surge of recognition throughout the chamber – an age-long racial hatred among the green men, whereas I felt a sense of kinship for the lad. The leader tied the boy's hands behind him with a red silk cord. An assistant parted the silk curtains, revealing a gallows on the dais, and the leader propelled the Arian boy up the steps and under the noose.

The boy struggled valiantly but was easily subdued by the green man who towered nearly four feet over him. The leader slipped the noose over the boy's head and tightened the knot. The boy looked straight ahead, breathing deeply. The green Jizmatic began striking at the boy's back with his tail, lightly at first, but then flailing savagely until it seemed that the lad would faint and strangle himself. Then, tired of playing, the laughing tormentor reached down and snapped the boy's neck, and at this grisly climax the members of his inner circle moved in to feed upon the victim's essence.

The horror! The horror!

I looked away from this ghoulish feast and realized with sickening dread that I would be next in the afternoon's entertainment. I wheeled around with my back to the nearest pillar, expecting to be overwhelmed but determined to give them as good a battle as the unequal odds would permit before I gave up my life.

Things were at their grimmest. Linn was at my side, protecting my flank with bone-breaking kicks, while I emptied the magazines of every pistol I could lay hand to with deadly accuracy, and though the bodies piled up around us, still they kept coming. Then, suddenly, a series of terrific explosions sounded outside, and before long a hundred ebony-skinned warriors flowed into the palace, cutting down the awful green men in their wake with sword-and-gun play. When they caught sight of the hanged boy, their fighting took on a new fury.

Within minutes the massacre was over. As a group of the victors moved to cut down the boy and others began the looting of the dead, their commander shouted over to us, "You there! Who are you? Friend of the newtmen or foe?"

"Foe," I answered, advancing slowly with my hands up. "I was next in line for the gallows, I am afraid."

"Hold," he said. "You wear the trappings of Freedonia."

"We are simple entertainers from Annexia," I explained.

"'We'?" he asked, looking around for other red men.

"This gaidaros and I," I said. "We were travelling to a distant place and captured on our way by these monsters. Thank you for saving us."

"But we are at war with Freedonia," he said, drawing his pistol. "So you are our prisoner. Or prisoners. You can save your stories for the Empress."

At this point, Linn spoke up. "Iron Will, meet Steely Dan, Lord Captain of the Black Pirates of Jizma. Steely Dan, meet Iron Will, the man from Pyosis."

Queen of Life and Death

The pirates took us aboard their fantastic airships which operated by a cosmic force unknown to Earth science. The landscape below raced by in excess of 200 miles per hour as my saviour-captors forced me to remove the remaining red paint from my skin. Dawn found us descending over the ruins of Koreh, a vast city in a broad mountain valley across the equator and nearly half-way around the world from Freedonia. It offered a sight both imposing and melancholic – mile after mile of toppled columns, demolished temples and crumbling palaces scattered throughout the green of an unleashed vegetation that seemed out of place on this arid world.

But it was not entirely abandoned. The ships quickly landed and I was escorted into a temple where, standing before a burnished throne that shone like beaten gold, stood a glorious and regal figure. I must have become overly accustomed to the adolescent physiques of Jizmatic women in my several months on their world, for the sight of a full-figured woman made me literally dumb with wonder.

Her long thick hair fell in dark tapering ringlets on her lovely white neck. Just above her brow shown a round disc. Her many-coloured robe was of fine linen; part was white, part yellow, part red. But what

caught and held my eye more than anything else was the deep black lustre of her mantle, slung from shoulder to hip, and embroidered with glittering stars on the hem.

"My Queen," said Steely Dan, bowing low. "Prince Kerz, he is dead."

With a low moan Ayssa sat down upon the throne. I was torn by a storm of conflicting emotions – this creature was more than a queen, she was a goddess incarnate. But what of Linn? The base impulses of my heart were grappling with the more noble aspirations of my mind.

"All is not lost," continued Steely Dan. "We brought his body back. And by strange chance and coincidence we captured a white madman who wears the harness of Freedonia yet claims to be from Pyosis."

I stepped forward, but before I could utter a salutation her blue eyes flashed with fire and she bolted upright.

"You!" she cried. "Marcus!"

"O Queen Ayssa, I am William Lee of Earth, third planet from the sun," I said, suddenly finding my tongue. "I set out from Lesser Annexia in the company of Linn the talking ass with the single purpose of journeying to your court in order to beg of you to show mercy upon your subject and return Linn's brain to its previous body."

Her gaze cooled considerably. "So, the proud Polluxian is behind this? Is Linn here? Bring the beast at once!" Then she turned to me again. "Why is your skin so pale? Are you a Polluxian like Linn? Or perhaps a Spician?"

"No, my Queen," I said. "I am a Virginian, from Pyosis."

"A Virgoan colony on Pyosis?" she said, arching an eyebrow. "What a novel thought. Perhaps you are mad."

Ayssa Unveiled

Once we were alone in her private chambers, Ayssa turned to me and said, "How are things in Rome these days?" It was another shock, since she had spoken to me in Latin!

I answered in kind, saying, "I know not, my Queen, since Rome lies far to the east of my country, across the ocean."

"Ah, so you come from the Hesperides," she said in Greek, smiling. "And how fares the mighty Republic? How prospers the family of Caesar?"

"The family of Caesar is long extinct, O Queen," I responded, struggling to keep up.

"And his Republic?"

"Long faded, O Queen."

"How long ago?" she asked in the Jizmatic tongue. "Of what year is the city? I would guess it to be nearly 940 years of age."

"I know not the age of Rome, my Queen," I said. "But nearly two millennia have passed since the death of Caesar."

"You lie!" she shouted.

"No, mighty Queen."

"Heed me, mortal," she said. "I will not be toyed with. If this be some elaborate jape, your fate is sealed with a death undreamt by the newtmen. Your miserable, worthless life hangs by the slenderest of threads. Now tell me the whole of your life and adventure, I command it!"

Cast in a role like that of Scheherezade, but compelled to truth rather than fabrication, I told of the adventures and misadventures which had led me from my ancestral home of Virginia through the jungles of the Amazon to my advent upon Mars.

"You materialized in a public lavatory?" she asked.

"Yes, O Queen," I answered. "At the Pneumatic Tube Station of Greater Annexia."

"Continue," she commanded.

I told of my apprenticeship under Benway, Master Mind of Jizma, which abruptly terminated with the raid by the Health Police, then of my desert trek with Linn.

"You seem rather fond of Linn," said Ayssa.

"I am," I declared. "Linn has been my best and truest friend on Jizma."

"Might your feelings for Linn be described as love?"

"Yes, they might," I said, feeling anew that tangle of emotions.

"Do you think Linn more beautiful than I?" she said, arching her back slightly.

"No," I stammered. "Of course not, O Queen. You are more beautiful than anyone."

"Perhaps you only say that because I hold your life in my hand," she said softly with a wan smile. "Continue with your account."

I did so. As I finished, who should be escorted into the chamber but Benway himself, summoned by way of wireless telephony and transported by swift airship. He immediately prostrated himself upon the floor and cried, "Hail Empress Ayssa, Queen of Life and Death! This slave is yours to dispose of."

"Arise, Benway," she said. "Behold this man – do you know him?"

The Master Mind turned to me and his docile expression gave way to the astonishment of recognition. "You!" he ejaculated. "Will Gigim! Are you truly a ghost this time?"

"Silence, Will," said Ayssa. "Doctor, answer the question."

Benway corroborated my story as I stood by in silence.

"Explain the raid," she said.

"Either the Health and Hygiene League or Security Troops from the Ministry of Health. Whichever one, the hand of Pretender Koyotel is behind it."

"Koyotel!" she cursed. "We should have killed her long ago. How is her power?"

"She now controls the Ministries of Health and Labour and seems to have succeeded in bending the ear of her husband the King. I fear an expedition fleet is being assembled against us." "Why did you not tell me this before?" demanded Ayssa. "Why did you not bring this man Will to me immediately?"

"A thousand excuses leap to my tongue," said Benway after a pause. "But none of them dare to face thee, O Queen. Kill me now, if you wish."

"I hope that your skills as scientist will be more useful than your skills as spy. I charge you to your

workshop to create the armies of synthetic men you have promised me. With them we may be able to fend off the Freedonian attack. Without them we are doomed. Go."

"Yes, O Queen," said Benway, prostrating himself again. "With the assistance of Will I can achieve this goal in half the time..."

"I will send him soon – now go!"

Once we were alone again, Ayssa turned to me. "Will, I am impressed with your story. There are some details which yet puzzle me, but there are many things you have spoken of which are unknown to the people of Jizma. I, too, am from Earth, but this is a closely guarded secret. You must swear to tell no one!"

I swore upon my honour, and then she sketched for me her own fantastic adventure, of how she had died in a manner similar to me (in her case, the bite of an aquatic centipede) and awoke among the ruins of Koreh. Her materialization was witnessed by the black pirates using the area as their base, and they had readily accepted her as a goddess.

"You have called me beautiful, such as men have named me on both worlds," she said. "But I have not changed a bit since the day I woke up here, and that was some two hundred and thirteen years ago!"

A Race Against Time

Linn's surgical transfer was preceded by a simple yet curious ceremony of atonement. In a large assembly hall filled with the few hundred of her subjects, Ayssa held out a single red rose. Linn approached slowly, bowed deeply, and then ate the rose from her hand. Benway led Linn away for the operation and I went back to work on the vats.

Several hours later I stumbled into the Queen's dining chamber by previous appointment. Ayssa, Benway, and Steely Dan were already seated. I apologized for being late.

"How did the surgery go?" I asked Benway as one of Ayssa's half-dozen or so white princes acted as server.

"Well, very well," Benway answered. "But what of your work?"

"It progresses, but slowly." We then launched into a technical discussion of growing tissue in vat cultures, a conversation that lasted for most of the meal. I had noticed the lad attending us kept trying to make eye contact with me, and was getting slightly annoyed at him. As the scientific talk died down, I returned to the previous subject.

"So tell me, doctor, how is the patient? I am surprised that Linn did not join us for supper."

"Ah, but Linn did join us," said the Master Mind, a laugh on his lips. With a sweep of his hand he indicated our waiter. "Iron Will, meet Prince Linn of the Polluxi. Prince Linn, meet Iron Will of Pyosis."

No doubt my face showed some fraction of the surprise and horror I felt. The others began laughing loudly, and Linn fled the room in shame.

"What ... have you done?" I finally managed to blurt out.

"Exactly what you asked me to do – I returned Linn's brain to his original body. Do you not like him? Is he not a fine specimen?"

"O my Will, what visions I have seen!" cried Ayssa. "Methought you were enamoured of an ass." She redoubled her laughter.

Suddenly my crisis of rage and confusion dissolved in catharsis; and realizing that my feelings for Linn had always been those of comradeship or brotherly love rather than any other kind, I laughed along with them.

My heart and mind were now drawn to one object, the peerless Ayssa, and by some strange magic, she too was drawn to me. I vowed to be her slave and she offered me marriage instead, speaking of how we would found a new race on Jizma, the Fifth Race of prophecy.

"A virile race of kings," she murmured when we were back in her private chambers after the ceremony. "We will sweep clean this decadent planet, uniting all under our banner. We will shun *efevresis* in favour of our old Earth magic. Let the subject races hatch and decant their pathetic offspring, ours will be born. You see, Will, this has been my secret, I am the only real woman on this world. Do you understand? They have forgotten, in their racial senility. We have that which they lack. Jizma is a no-man's world, and I have been so lonely, ever so lonely without you, but now you are here."

"Yes, my Ayssa."

"'Ayssa' is just a title," she said. "When we are alone together, you may call me Thea, since that is my name. Now look, Will, see here the sign of our new race." She drew a circle with a cross inside. "By this sign shall we conquer Jizma with Earth magic..."

The Pillar of Light

Having never been in battle before, I have difficulty expressing the horror and confusion that met us on the morning when the attack finally came. By the time I arrived on the scene, several of our pirate vessels lay destroyed on the ground, while the others had either fled or were fighting beyond the valley wall. Drifting across the sky was a fearsome armada flying the crossed hammer-and-sword of Freedonia, slowly moving in for the kill. Explosive projectiles were going off all around, from the sharp cracks of the small arms up through to the thunderous blasts of heavy ordnance.

Since even our rifles were useless against the ship hulls, Linn and I were desperately trying to prevent ships from landing and discharging troops by waiting until they came in close and then spraying the decks with rapid fire. Nearby, our only heavy gun emplacement was valiantly hammering away at the Freedonian ships with one-inch-diameter bullets. A stream of these potent projectiles managed to tear a gash in the buoyancy tank of a ship manoeuvring to land, and it plummeted into the tangle of jungle-covered ruins. The crew of another enemy ship struggled to extinguish a deck fire while Linn and I tried to keep them from succeeding.

A few pirate vessels swooped into view from the west, giving us hope, but then our heavy gun fell suddenly silent. The gunner had been killed, but the gun itself appeared to be operable, and since it was all

that we had, I ran over to man it myself.

I never got there. Instead I ran into what I can only describe as a pillar of light.

There was pain, a great deal of pain. I saw my life flash before my eyes, the past, the present, and even the future...

"... in the interests of science, to measure the crania of those going out there..."

A game of Jizmatic chess, red against white, where pieces can turncoat unexpectedly...

Koyotel snarled, "Die, Conquistador! Die!"...

... Jizma is only the outer plain, threshold to the astral plain...

Ayssa held out a single red rose...

"What, are you some kind of *gigim?* A ghost..."

Finally, the whiteness became so white that it was black.

The Embrace of Death

It was dawn when I opened my eyes again, awakened by the sound of my own death-rattle. My mouth was full of dust and strange, stiff garments were upon my body; garments that cracked into powder as I rose to a sitting posture.

As I comprehended the desiccated corpse on the couch beside me I realized that I was back in the cave of Lupita. My death on Jizma had sent me back to Earth! But I was as weak as a newborn babe. It took all of my energy and a good part of the morning to crawl across the cave to where the bundles of wild honey sat, offerings to savage gods unnamed. As I reached for the honey, I saw my own hand for the first time and was horrified to see its shrunken and macerated appearance. I had somehow been mummified!

I will not bore you with the details of my return to civilization. Suffice to say, after gorging myself upon honey and rainwater for three days, I emerged from the cave and made my way north. When I arrived at the town of Manaus I found it greatly expanded, more than I thought possible in the year or so I had been away. Dr Monygham was nowhere to be found. Then I learned that the year was 1896, and fully nine years had passed since I had set out into the jungle.

With the financial assistance of missionaries and scientists I returned to my homeland. If strangers had difficulty accepting my story, that was nothing compared to friends and family. They were by turns shocked, horrified, sceptical and sympathetic. Gradually they came to believe in my identity, if not in my whereabouts for the last decade.

It seems that Mr Bradly Martin, my employer, had married my widowed mother within a few months of my departure, thinking that I would soon return from what he thought was a wild goose chase and grow to accept his new status in the house as a *fait accompli.* As for my old college-chum Teddy, he is still living in New York City, now as head of the police board, but he is gravitating towards Washington, D.C. again, having served there for a few years during my absence. Telling him of my adventure rekindled the old fires, and he talked of organizing expeditions, though I sensed even he only half-heartedly believed me.

But that is no matter, since I know what I know. Thanks to Benway's advanced science, I have created a new pain-killer, more powerful than morphine yet lacking its addictive properties. I call it "Ayssa" after the person I consider the real heroine of this adventure, my wife and queen on another world. In addition, we have a secret ingredient for a new soft drink – Mr Bradly Martin's prediction has proven remarkably accurate, as witnessed by the rise of the Anti-Saloon League in Ohio. A Mr Asa Candler bought the secret of Coca-cola for the princely sum of 2,300 dollars. Clearly Pemberton thinks it has topped out, but we are willing to bet that Candler will go far and we intend to catch or surpass him. Look out, Coke, here comes "Jazmine!"

It seems that Madame Sosostris died in the same year that Candler made his purchase. But I wonder if that was the last we will see of her. For in searching for a new chemical compound, it seems that I have stumbled upon a Fountain of Youth, if not Immortality itself.

You might laugh at such a claim coming from this withered body. My own experience proves that time passes more swiftly on Earth than on Jizma, at a ratio of roughly nine to one. Whole vistas of ancient and forgotten science have opened up for me. I now know the secrets of the Pharaohs, and why honey was placed in their tombs for their eventual return. Consider Ayssa, with her two Jizmatic centuries of incomparable beauty, and how nearly 2,000 years have passed on Earth in that period. I have learned her identity on Earth – she is none other than Thea Philopater, better known as Cleopatra – and plan to re-enter Jizma from Alexandria, Egypt, in order to arrive at the ruined city of Koreh. But I must hurry. Even now the battle rages. Though I have time-dilation on my side, still every second counts. Has the red queen Koyotel yet succeeded in killing my white queen Ayssa? Has brave Linn fallen in battle or been taken prisoner? Has Benway completed the army of synthetic men? I find that liberal use of cocaine allows me to complete more work within the brief hours of a day, but I must return to Jizma as quickly as possible.

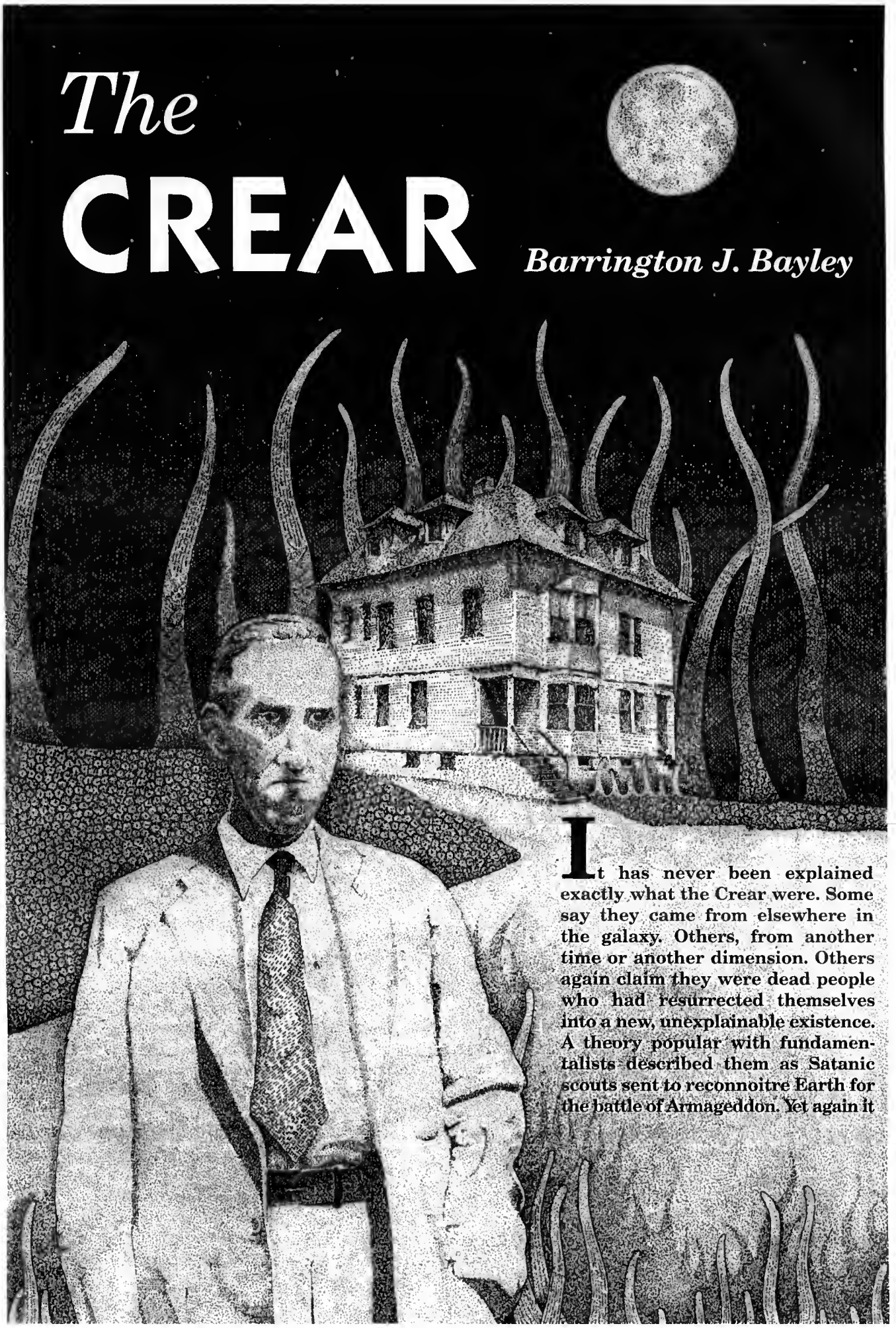
The red planet is calling me. Mars, the god of war, but his more ancient title is the flayed god, He-who-is-sacrificed. Jizma summons me, a call I cannot resist. Ayssa beckons me, and it is She Who Must Be Obeyed.

WATCH for the Exciting Sequels: "The Gods of Jizma" and "Secret Master of Jizma"!

Michael Andre-Driussi figured that if Philip José Farmer could write an Edgar Rice Burroughs story in the style of William S. Burroughs ("The Jungle Rot Kid on the Nod," 1969), then he could do the reverse – a WSB story in the style of ERB. Michael lives near San Francisco, and the above is his first story for *Interzone.* His book on Gene Wolfe, *Lexicon Urthus: A Dictionary for the Urth Cycle,* appeared in 1994.

The CREAR

Barrington J. Bayley



It has never been explained exactly what the Crear were. Some say they came from elsewhere in the galaxy. Others, from another time or another dimension. Others again claim they were dead people who had resurrected themselves into a new, unexplainable existence. A theory popular with fundamentalists described them as Satanic scouts sent to reconnoitre Earth for the battle of Armageddon. Yet again it

Illustration by Sylvia Starshine

was claimed that they were no more than people who had combined some new hippie philosophy with a secret science of human transformation. The last claim is supported by the fact that quite normal people could, by degrees, sometimes become Crear. At the same time it is one of the hardest explanations to understand. Who, unless hypnotized by a strange and alien doctrine, would willingly and irrevocably shed his humanity?

So who was she? You would have taken her for an ordinary person, really. Inhibited, even. You know the sort of girl who is slim and neat, but always wears navy-blue suits as if she is afraid to put on bright colours? Who is outwardly calm, but has an inner tension which you can see if you look even a little closely?

Her reserve meant that I could get to know her only slowly. I first met her at one of those dull north-London parties apt to be held on Friday evenings. She sat alone in the corner of the room, isolated from the subdued hubbub. This was what drew me to her, and also the ungentlemanly thought, possibly, that shy and un-self-confident as she appeared, she might be easy to seduce – a thought which if it really was in my mind could not have been more mistaken. She spoke politely, in a quiet but positive voice, though with little inflection. Plainly she was not addicted to small talk, but neither would one call her conversation vivacious. On the contrary it was decidedly prosaic. Her one concession to expressiveness was her habit of widening her eyes slightly when she made some particular point, a gesture which I admit I found enchanting.

Discovering that we lived in the same district, we shared a taxi home, and it was then that I learned we lived only a few streets apart. Accordingly I contrived to be walking past her building at the time when I guessed she would be coming home from work. After two or three essays of this kind I succeeded in "bumping into" her, and somehow persuaded her to invite me in for coffee.

She had a large and pleasant "bedsit." I took an interest in inspecting the single bookshelf. There were a few books on philosophy of the more easy-to-read type, some novels, and a few volumes on art and calligraphy.

"Where do you work?" I asked.

"For a design company."

"Oh, you're a designer?"

Her glance flicked to the book on calligraphy I had just replaced on the shelf. "No, I'm not very good at that sort of thing. I do the office work."

In the following months she allowed me to visit her occasionally, though not for any length of time, or to have a brief drink with her in the pub along the road, and once, a meal in a nearby Indian restaurant. No hint or promise either of romance or sensuality entered our relationship. I felt sure that any move in that direction from me would instantly have ended our acquaintance.

It pleased me, then, when she telephoned one day and asked me to take her to the Roundhouse.

The Roundhouse was a circular building in Chalk Farm originally built for the repair of railway engines. Now it had become a venue for "youth culture" gatherings. I asked her why she wanted to go to one of these. "It might be interesting," she answered.

I knew that she was using me as a companion of convenience, unwilling to undertake the adventure alone. Travelling by underground, we arrived at the looming building in the gathering dusk.

The cavernous interior swarmed with mostly young people, their garb varying from the extravagant to the merely scruffy. Face-paint and dyed hair abounded. Furthest from the entrance, on a platform against the wall, a quartet played "cool" jazz which politely did not overpower the proceedings. We wandered around for a while, taking in this sight and that. Nothing seemed to be organized. People were simply "there."

Eventually she sat on one of the chairs provided, wearing a bored expression, unimpressed by the beads, the varicoloured hair, the voluminous cloaks and gowns which betokened the current fashion. She looked very much out of place, in her conventional blue suit. Regarding her, I found the air of ostentatious revelry around us shallow and flippant.

"Don't you like it here?" I asked.

She shrugged.

Some yards away, a group of teenagers squatted on the ground. They were diverting themselves by setting light to scraps of paper. "Look, there's a 'happening'," I joked.

She smiled faintly.

Then the half-frown of dawning curiosity came to her features. Walking through the throng, glancing this way and that as if on a tour of inspection, came three gaunt figures. They might have been brothers, all with the same bony faces and high cheek bones. Their clothing was a parody of the youth fashion: tattered jerkins and bottoms, cloaks so ragged as to consist of little more than torn strips. Despite this, their movements were elegant and self-controlled.

"Who are they?" she breathed.

"They are Crear," I said, a little jealous of her interest. "They've been around lately. Some cult or other."

"What do they do?"

"Do? Oh, I don't know. A new religion, perhaps."

"Religion's no use," she murmured off-handedly. Then: "Why are they called Crear?"

"I don't know."

The Crear came close. The eyes of one fell on her. The tall figure leaned, gazing into her uplifted face. His eyes, I observed, were an unusual colour: pale magenta. Also there was a network of fine purple lines on his face and neck, like veins except that they were apparently painted or tattooed on the skin. In the dimness of the Roundhouse they seemed almost phosphorescent.

Holding the other's stare, she became even paler than usual. Then the Crear abruptly turned his ragged back. All three departed.

"Are there many of them?" she asked.

"They seem to go wandering all over London. No one takes much notice of them. I've heard some of them live in a big house on Hampstead Heath."

"Is that so?"

She looked around her, as if for one last time, then slowly rose.

"Shall we go now?"

I didn't feel like arguing. I escorted her home, where she declined to invite me in. I did not see her again for about two weeks, until I summoned the courage to ring her doorbell one evening.

She led me up the stairs. She seemed distracted as she made the obligatory coffee, stirring the cup with a withdrawn expression on her face.

I laid the cup aside, not even pretending to drink it. Something in her had changed.

"Is something wrong?" I asked. "You seem upset."

She made a dismissive gesture, then began pacing to and fro, hugging her arms to her chest. "Life is so useless. It's so boring. I don't know why we have to live at all."

This was the first time I had heard her speak with anything approaching passion. Her words gave me the uneasy feeling that I had been consigned to the useless and boring world and excluded forever from her private self.

"There must be something that would make it worthwhile," I suggested.

"And what might that be?"

"Well." I hesitated. "There's love."

"Love?" She wrinkled her nose. "What good is that? A pain and a grief to those that feel it, nothing but a nuisance to those who are its objects."

She averted her face. Her eloquent outburst had left her embarrassed. She went and sat by the table on the far side of the room, laying her hands on her knees and staring at them.

I reasoned that some past disappointment lay behind her bitterness, and I indulged in a vague anger at whoever had hurt her. After a while she spoke again.

"I saw some Crear in Oxford Street today."

"Were they chanting *Hare Krishna?*" I said with a grin.

Nervousness had prompted my feeble jokes which only served to irritate her.

"Don't be silly," she muttered.

I had alienated myself even further. Sensing that I was no longer truly welcome, I left.

Discouraged by my ineptness, I stayed sway for some time after that. One evening late in the summer I strolled to a pub in Holland Park Avenue and sat sipping beer in the lounge. I was startled to see her enter, accompanied by a middle-aged man. He was stocky, slightly under medium height, dressed in nondescript clothing. He struck me as an unlikely boy friend, and I wished I had gone elsewhere. But she seemed not the slightest bit put out at seeing me, and brought him straight over.

"This is Mr Charles Huggers."

My initial reading of him abated as he came closer. His face was pale and intense, with a square brow and a mouth that could be described as surly, so that the overall impression was almost one of ferocity. They sat down with me. For half an hour we chatted inconsequentially. Then she abruptly broke into the conversation.

"Mr Huggers lives with the Crear."

I looked at him anew. He stared stonily ahead as if on military parade – displeased, most likely, by her disclosure.

"Their philosophy interests you?" I asked him.

"The Crear have no philosophy," Huggers answered shortly.

"Oh."

Through the lounge window one of the trees in the avenue could be seen stirring in the evening breeze. I allowed it to distract me. It was when I returned my attention to the table that I noticed a thin purple line on the side of Charles Huggers' neck, as if drawn by a fine ink-marker. I found myself rudely staring at it.

Her eyes widened. "Go on, Mr Huggers. Tell him what it is."

He cleared his throat, turned to me with an air of resolution, and spoke in an annoyed tone.

"Young man, if you really want to know, I will indeed tell you. Let me make an analogy. Nature has made two types of skeleton. Insects have exoskeletons, or external shells. Chordates, among which are classed mammals such as ourselves, have endoskeletons, which are internal. But nature has made no such distinction where it comes to types of nervous system. There is only one, and it is internal.

"The Crear are different. To their natural internal nervous system they have added an external one by artifice. The lines and small tubes you see on a Crear are what make up that system. If you wish to become a Crear those additional lines of communication are given to you piece by piece. As time goes by, they take precedence over the internal system, modifying it and taking it to new heights. Perception changes. Consciousness changes. Everything changes."

His fanaticism was intimidating, but also ridiculous. How he could come to believe that lines drawn or tattooed on the skin could work such wonders was a wonder in itself.

"Fascinating," I murmured politely. "So the Crear are just human beings, or were once?"

"Not quite human," Huggers replied thoughtfully. "Not of this Earth. But it doesn't matter. Anyone with a humanoid nervous system can become Crear, if they have the courage."

"Why would anyone want to change? Isn't it better to be normal?"

"You have put your finger on it. An element of predestination is involved. Those with the potential to become Crear are already different from 'normal' human beings. They are those with the daring to break out from the merely 'normal'. To risk all for the glorious adventure." His face worked desperately. "We are parachutists into the dark land of death. We are pole-vaulters over the wall which hides infinity." He paused, gasping and wheezing. "Kamikaze pilots of metamorphosis. Hell's Angels of existentialism!"

Listening to his florid outburst, I realized that it was not aimed at me. It was aimed at her. He actually saw her as a recruit.

"Mr Huggers says we could visit the house on Hampstead Heath," she said. "Where the Crear live."

"Yes, of course you may come there, my dear, at any time." Huggers rose to his feet. His magniloquence

seemed to have exhausted him. "But I have said enough. I will leave you with your friend."

In a delightfully old-fashioned gesture he kissed her hand, then departed.

"The Crear seem to intrigue you," I said when he had gone.

"They're more interesting than the others," she said blankly.

Already she had told me how in the past she had attended a number of the "esoteric" or self-development cults in which London abounds. But she had not been much impressed by any of them.

"I think it's all nonsense," I told her.

Despite my dismissiveness she arranged to go with me to the Crear house that weekend. I was perfectly happy to be the beneficiary of her usual reluctance to go anywhere by herself, and as usual fell in with her suggestion. We spent some time finding the place, and arrived late on the Saturday afternoon.

The house stood alone on the lower part of the heath. It was an imposing building, constructed, I guessed, in Edwardian times, though somewhat eccentrically Americanized, complete with dormer windows. Once it would have been the home of a well-off upper-middle-class family. Now it had become rather dilapidated. I thought it likely that the Crear were actually squatters there.

The front door, within a pillared porch, stood ajar. Neither ringing the doorbell nor banging the big brass knocker brought any response. After a while we took it on ourselves to go inside uninvited.

We were in a large reception hall. On one side there ascended a staircase. On the other a door stood open. Through it could be seen a lounge. Striking was the sparsity of furniture: it consisted, to be exact, of a long sagging ottoman in the middle of the floor.

We went in and sat on it for a while, thinking the house empty.

"I knew you would come."

It was the voice of Charles Huggers. He had entered from the hallway. But his eyes were on my friend, and he seemed to be speaking to her, not to me.

"There isn't much time left."

"Aren't there any Crear here?" she asked.

"Yes, they are about."

Just as he said this footsteps sounded on the bare wood of the stairway. A procession of perhaps a dozen Crear came down, filing into the lounge, treading the bare boards. Most were Crear as one usually saw them: tall, gaunt, high-cheekboned, as though cloned in the same vat, the Crear who had originally appeared suddenly in London as if from outer space.

But with them were two or three recruits of more local appearance. One was a slight young man with clear pale skin and a thoughtful expression. His eyes shone warmly as though he looked "beyond" at something I could not see. Purple lines decorated his face and passed down his neck.

A Crear stepped to Huggers and gestured. In response Huggers drew off his grey pullover and then his shirt. On his flabby body a few blue lines wandered erratically. The Crear extended a forefinger and drew it lightly across Huggers' chest. A fresh blue line appeared where it passed, causing Huggers to gasp and shiver.

Turning away as Huggers dressed himself, the Crear smiled at my companion. Was it the same individual we had encountered in the Roundhouse? At any rate, with the same forefinger he had used on Huggers, he made a more extravagant gesture. He drew an upright circle in the sir, his finger leaving a golden glowing trail where it passed. Then he plunged his hand into it. As he withdrew his hand, the circle faded.

He was holding a posy of flowers.

I am no horticulturist, but I did not recognize those flowers. They had broad petals, patterned russet and ochre. Her eyes widened in delight as he offered the posy to her. But the instant she accepted it the flowers exploded into a cloud of moths, which fluttered about the room and disappeared.

It was a good trick, I had to admit. The Crear and their recruits sat on the floor, some cross-legged, some squatting, some just sprawling. Those who happened to face one another began some kind of conversation.

It was not a conversation in the form that I knew it, or one that I could follow. It consisted mainly of sign language, small, minimalist hand-movements, interspersed with single words every now and then, mostly in a language unknown to me, but a few in English. I remember some of these:

"Purport."

"Enable."

"Convey."

Huggers did not take part. He stayed on his feet, looking over the scene and breathing heavily. I asked him why the Crear communicated in sign language. He shrugged, but made no answer.

After a while the Crear rose of one accord, filed out of the room and through the front door.

"Where are they going?" she asked.

"On to the heath. To define the place."

"What place?" I queried.

He glanced at me sharply. "Do you know that the Crear are immortal? Oh yes. But there is a price to be paid. If you want to experience the higher delights of the cosmos, you must also accept its horrors."

"You speak very colourfully," she remarked. "Are you a poet?"

He huffed in amusement. "Perhaps I could have been. I talk too much, I know. No doubt I shall talk less once I become more... like them. Have you noticed that the Crear use few words? It is because they have no need. Every gesture, every look, is pregnant with poetry. Hence their knowing smile, almost supercilious in its appearance, which you must have noticed."

Then he seemed to become annoyed with himself for having responded to a personal question. "What I am or am not is unimportant," he snapped. "You ask such questions because your lives are small. Hence your perceptions are small. It is part of being 'normal'. Perhaps you should be glad to be 'normal'. It means that you cannot know the best, but at the same time you are protected from the worst. Once you launch yourselves beyond the heavens, once you join the great cosmic cycle, your pleasures are beyond descrip-

tion but so are your sufferings as well."

Huggers glared first at her, then more intensely at me. "You do not believe what I am saying. You think it is delusion. Stay in this house and you will be convinced of the truth of my words. And yet so what? You will not be able to bear it, either of you. You will run and hide yourselves from the light, worms that you are."

This insult rankled, and I rose to go. But then Huggers' manner changed suddenly. He waved his arm to the room's external wall.

The lounge had what are known as French windows, in other words metal-framed glass doors set in a bay, opening on to a tiny garden that was no more than an enclosure overhung by trees and penned by a round wall. The rear of the house faced the rising heath so that sunset came early, casting the garden in gloom. Huggers pointed.

"See our little *hortus inclusus*. Two lilac trees, a path winding between them, and a screen of shrubs and bushes. How confined it is, to ordinary perception. But look! There is magic in that garden. It has endless depths. That path, which if you pace it with your mind fixed on the mundane, merely curls round the tree on the right and returns to the house, can take you to unpredicted vistas."

Under the spell of Huggers' language the tawdry garden became transformed. Something impelled me. I stepped through the French windows and stood in the enclosure. Behind me in the lounge Huggers continued speaking, his words floating to me.

"Our world is like that little garden. Crabbed and confined. Yet if you but know how to find them, there are paths to lead you to realms unimaginable."

I walked the path, which was narrow and crazy-paved. In a few steps I passed between the lilac trees. The fragrance of sage and rosemary came to me as I penetrated the screen of bushes. For a few moments I became confused, unable to make sense of what was around me.

Then I was no longer walking. I was sitting in a shallow leaf-shaped boat seemingly hammered from a single sheet of bronze. The boat was gliding through a rank-smelling swamp. The catkin-like branches of trees growing on tufted muddy islands trailed in the green-skinned water. Other trees lifted their branches high above the green slime, forming an overhead hatchwork of criss-crossing fingers. I could not name any of those trees. But what did it matter? The trees themselves did not know their names. They had no need, even though they exuded a secret vegetable intelligence. But they knew that they trailed their catkins in the water, or raised tangles into the humid air.

I obeyed an impulse to look astern. Sitting staring at me from the tiller was an extraordinary creature. It was as if a beetle had been refashioned into a man. Gleaming black integument in place of skin, bulging insect eyes, a lipless mouth.

The beetle-man took his hand from the tiller, rose to his feet and pointed an obsidian finger at me.

Frightened, I turned away. No longer was I in the swamp. The house faced me. I had rounded the lilac tree and was on the return path.

If I had not taken fright...?

I completed my journey, stepping back into the lounge. Huggers had fallen silent.

"How did you do that?" I demanded. "Is it hypnotism?"

He frowned as if in puzzlement. "I did nothing. If something happened it is because you are touched by the Crear."

"I seemed to be on another planet."

"Hah! I told you of the depths of our little garden. If you only knew the extent of this house! While the Crear are here, it is not of this Earth."

She was looking at me curiously as Huggers pursed his lips, then seemed to come to a decision.

"You have a right to know the secret, though it is no secret at all, no one has hidden it. Consider how confined, just like that little garden, human life is. Its span is that of a naturally evolved animal. Its cycles are days and years. The Crear, on the other hand, are virtually immortal. Their life span is the span of the cosmos. Yet their lives, too, undergo a cycle, a cosmic pulse entirely unknown to our science. It is a cycle which climbs to the heights and descends to the depths. For an aeon the Crear sojourn in paradise, experiencing the cosmic level of existence in all its voluptuousness. Then the price must be paid. They descend into a kind of hell, to endure sufferings just as inconceivable. There cannot be one without the other. It is part of being Crear, just as it is part of being human to have nightmares."

He licked his lips, almost lasciviously. "The Crear are in London for a reason: to await the downturn of the cycle. It will come very soon. Even they fear it. But for us it is a chance to gain immortality."

Huggers' turgid monologue had wearied me. I raised my eyebrows to my friend as a signal that I was ready to go. Meekly, and slightly to my surprise, she complied.

We left the house and walked way from it towards the nearby road. Before we reached it I again suffered a dislocation. I was no longer in the lee of Hampstead Heath. I walked a gantry with an apple-green floor which was rubbery to the foot, almost like a resilient jelly. There spread all around me, for level after tangled level, a mad city-machine. Everything seemed to be made of plastic in brilliant, clear colours. It was an inferno of demonic mechanisms. Red piston-rods plunged back and forth. Drive shafts hummed. Intricate tubing in blue, magenta, orange and green crackled with energy. Cylindrical structures several storeys tall, resembling fractional distillation vessels, made gulping, bellowing sounds.

The entire panorama was devoid of workers or inhabitants. It was entirely automatic. But gradually I became aware that a companion walked with me. It was my son – an anomalous realization, since of course I have no son. Furthermore he was no more than five years younger than myself. Before we reached the end of the walkway it was briefly transected by a vibrant purple haze. A fat piston slid into a yellow cylinder. A luminous cloud the hue of flowers of sulphur hissed out. My son was gone. I understood that he had been converted into a gas and compressed.

Now I understood the purpose of the enigmatic city-

machine. It was an industrial plant for the conversion and transformation of human life.

I would have lingered but the floor itself moved and carried me on. Jewel-like lights winked and flickered. My son stepped out of a doorway, still dressed as before in his fashionable pseudo-military jacket with matching medals. But now he seemed unable to stand properly erect. He was bent at the waist, as though he had suffered a serious back-injury at some time. Medallion-like objects had been affixed to various parts of his body, mediators now of his somatic functions which had bypassed the spinal column. He beseeched me to dance with him, so I did. He danced with anxious determination, summoning up all his energy to prove that the changes did not leave him impaired. "I'm all right," he insisted. But the awkward jerkiness of his movements could not be overlooked. When he could no longer deny what had been done to him he wept with despair.

I came out of the vision as abruptly as I had gone into it, as though waking suddenly from an unusually vivid bad dream. A note of warning was in my head, telling me that the Crear philosophy amounted to a perversion of the human condition rather than an enhancement of it.

I realized that the hallucination, if that was what it was, had all taken place in the instant between one footstep and the next. "Did you experience anything odd just then?" I asked.

"Yes."

"What was it?"

"I wouldn't know how to describe it."

"Was it ... unpleasant?"

"Oh no!" she said eagerly. "It was wonderful! But I just can't describe it."

We both were nervous of saying anything more. We made our way home, and parted. But in the following weeks I found it easier to gain her company. She seemed more comfortable in my presence and did not raise as many barriers as formerly. I was glad of this, feeling that I had achieved something.

Towards the end of this time we went to a concert at the Festival Hall. I remember that the programme included Mozart's *Jupiter*, Beethoven's *Fourth*, and a suite by Hindemith. In the interval we took ourselves to the large and spacious foyer, which thronged with people.

I asked her if she had enjoyed the performance so far. "Yes, it was very good," she said, though as usual with no sign of having been particularly enthralled. Then a distant look came into her eye. I turned to follow her gaze.

A sense of repetition came to me, as I recalled the evening in the Roundhouse. A Crear had entered at one end of the foyer, his gait lanky as he strolled through the crowded concourse and disappeared at the further end. She watched his progress with a dreamy, slightly woe-begone look.

"I see that the Crear still interest you," I said, trying to keep irony out of my voice.

"I've been back to the house," she admitted. "Twice."

This news disconcerted me, partly because she had kept it from me till now. I wondered if she had made the visits by herself, or had been taken there by Charles Huggers, or by someone else.

"I didn't stay long," she said defensively. I sensed her barriers returning, and so did not question her further.

A week later she phoned me with some news.

"The Crear are all going away tomorrow. 'Departing this realm' is how Mr Huggers puts it. He's asked me if I want to see them leave." She hesitated. "Will you come with me?"

"Why do you want me along?"

"I want to see what happens, but I'm nervous of going on my own."

"I think you'll find they are packing themselves into transit vans to set up a commune in Wales," I said dryly.

But of course she persuaded me to accompany her yet again. I called on her about midday. Before we set out she made me an omelette, so that we did not complete our journey till late afternoon.

The moment we arrived before the house, the feeling came over me of having been plunged into an imaginary world. Autumn had arrived, and the light had that fading quality of the year's later part. In the foreground stood the figure of Charles Huggers, apparently waiting for us.

We approached. I saw that his face was strained. His body was stiff and trembling.

He was terrified.

I looked beyond him. I remember that a full moon rode in the sky. And there was something strange. Rising above the roof and surrounding grounds were distortions in the air – faint plumes or wisps seeming to originate like marsh gas from beneath the foundations of the building, so that my senses almost discarded their presence at first. Then a thought struck me. Here was an explanation of the visions we had experienced on our first visit. The Crear could have arranged an hallucinogenic miasma which permeated the house, perhaps emanating from chemicals brewed in the cellar. It relieved me to think we had been the victims of an airborne drug, no more.

Huggers called out in a voice of bravado. "Ah, you have arrived. Let us go. You are to be witnesses to an otherwise unnoticed event."

He led us round the side of the house.

"We are not going inside?" she asked.

"No, they are already on the heath. Come."

We went round the back of the little garden, which seemed even smaller when seen from the outside. The heat of a long dry summer had withered the grass of the heath. We commenced mounting the slope, and continued until we came to a level area where the Crear were collected. They were clustered together, sitting or kneeling on the ground. Yet there were surprisingly few of them. Even with their new recruits they numbered no more than two or three dozen.

I turned to Huggers. "Where are the others?"

"This is all there are."

"They seemed to be all over London at one time."

He replied in a mutter. "Yes, I know. They are not restricted by location, as we are, I think. They can be in several places at a time. I will say goodbye to you both now."

He extended a trembling hand, which we clasped

by turns. "Stay here," he told us. "Don't come any closer."

He stumbled away and seated himself with the others, folding his arms as if to comfort himself.

We also sat down, and waited. It was obvious that the other Crear recruits were, like Huggers, badly frightened, their faces set and sweating. The original Crear were in fear, too, but it was a controlled fear, a fear patiently borne. They sat in supercilious calm, lips knowingly curved.

What dreadful ceremony, I asked myself, was about to be performed? Then the sign came. The sign of the circle. Twenty or thirty feet in diameter, forming on the grass of the heath close to the Crear, like a fairy circle but glowing the colour of misty gold. The grass faded into oblivion within its compass. There was only a vagueness, a dark murky nothing.

The circle had become a pit.

Then it was that Charles Huggers sprang to his feet uttering an animal-like howl, and came rushing in our direction, his face a distorted mask of terror. He almost ran into us in his blind panic, then he was off down the heath as fast as he could go, still yelling, once or twice felling over to lurch to his feet and hurl himself further onward.

His cries faded in the distance.

There was no reaction to Huggers' defection on the part of the Crear or their recruits. For the next minute or two they continued to sit in silence, and then I felt a stir beside me. With quick movements she got to her feet, crossed to where the Crear sat beside the ground circle, and sank down among them.

She sat demurely in her dark blue suit with her head bowed and not a glance to me, as if doing something shameful but in which she was absolutely determined. For perhaps another minute my heart pounded as I beheld the scene, unable to act or understand. Confounded by the turn of events, at length I turned my face away.

When I looked again only moments later the circle had faded. The bleached grass was as before. The heath was empty of people, leaving only myself.

The Crear were gone. And she was gone. Gone. Gone. Gone with the Crear, drawn down with them into the abyss of a nightmare age, eventually to emerge once more on the upturn of the cycle.

But that would be long in the future and far from Earth, in a state of mind and condition of body impossible for me to predict or comprehend.

For a long time I sat on the heath, thinking how wrong I had been about everything. Then I stood up and went home.

So who was she?

She was just a girl. Just an ordinary girl. Someone I –

But what use is it now to speak of love?

Barrington J. Bayley lives in Telford, Shropshire. He has been appearing in British sf magazines since he was a teenager in the mid-1950s – and in this magazine in particular since issue 4 (Spring 1983). His most recent contribution was the delightful fable "A Crab Must Try" (*Interzone* 103).

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Another shattering loss to Britain's sf community: **Richard Evans**, senior sf editor at Gollancz, died on 26 May. He was only 46. Still badly weakened after severe illness in 1994, he had returned from a US trip with pneumonia but thought his chest pains were from straining to lift a suitcase; he entered hospital too late. All sympathy to his wife, Ali Dunn, and their two teenaged children. Editors receive little public recognition, but Richard's funeral on 31 May at Kensal Green saw a huge turn-out of fellow-editors, agents and writers. Jo Fletcher spoke movingly at this secular celebration of his life. Michael Scott Rohan and I were among those grateful to Richard for buying our first novels when at Arrow; at Futura, he launched the Orbit imprint; at Gollancz, he continued a tradition of excellence. Other writers present included Brian Aldiss, John Brosnan, Chris Evans, Harry Harrison, Rob Holdstock, Roz Kaveney, Christopher Priest and Andrew Stephenson – all of whom inevitably gravitated to a pub and swapped fond anecdotes about Richard. One that he used to tell himself concerned his first day at Oxford, when after lengthily gathering courage he stepped out of his college room to be confronted by an exquisite fop in a velvet suit, cape and broad-brimmed aesthete's hat, who sneered and passed by. Deeply conscious of his jeans and t-shirt, Richard retreated to his room and (he claimed) stayed there for three days. The other chap proved to be Martin Amis.

Condolences from afar came from Neil Gaiman, busy novelizing his tv series *Neverwhere* – "...was devastated. *Neverwhere* was in many ways spawned from a conversation I had at 3:00am in a bar at a con at Glasgow in '85 or '86 with him. Shit shit shit." – and Terry Pratchett, trapped in a signing tour: "I think I liked it better when I was in the age group that went to each other's weddings."

THE POISON BELT

John Brosnan still wonders what hit him. He went for a perfectly ordinary lunch with his editor John Jarrold to celebrate publication of his comic fantasy *Have Demon, Will Travel*. "But we did not over-indulge. Oh no." Suddenly our author found himself no longer in Pimlico but being treated for a head injury in hospital. A close encounter with a car? A bicycle? JB remains mystified. "*Had Lunch, Went Travelling.*"

Vera Chapman (1898-1996), Arthurian fantasy novelist and founder of the Tolkien Society in 1969, died in mid-May.

Timothy Leary died on 31 May (aged 75) but, rather than have his head frozen by Charles Platt's cryonics company, had decided that his ashes should be fired into space. Quoth Charles, "Life is full of disappointments."

Jon Pertwee (1919-96) died on 20 May aged 76; his much-loved tv rôles as the third Dr Who (1970-4) and Worzel Gummidge (1979-81; 1987; 1989) occupied only a tiny fraction of his 60-year acting career. Other appearances with a genre flavour were in *Toad of Toad Hall* (BBC), *The Avengers* and *The Goodies*.

Charles Stross, famous *IZ* author, promotes his new book: "*The Web Architect's Handbook* (Addison-Wesley). Yep, it's got all you need to know about the construction of large web sites, in that classic *Interzone* style: *the squamous SGML parser groaned as it writhed beneath the iron boot of her DTD; "Now, little web site," hissed the editor, "this is what I want you to look like..."*"

John Wyndham... the plot thickens. The "Wyndham Archive" currently being offered for £100,000 was sold by the former Trustee of Wyndham's estate. This person allegedly neglected to consult or inform the heirs – who inherited the estate when JW's widow died in mid-1991, and had a tough time wresting control from said Trustee. By then the papers had been flogged, in *late* 1991, through an agent who still keeps the purchaser's identity a deep secret and who is now handling the current sale at a price "several multiples" higher. Information on this deal's progress is requested.

ANSIBLE LINK



DAVID LANGFORD

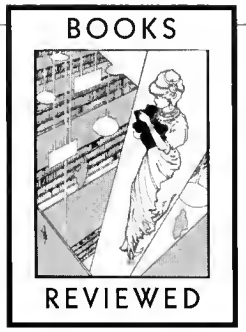
INFINITELY IMPROBABLE

A Sign in Space. Next year, the *Cassini* spacecraft will be launched, carrying a probe and instrument package to the Saturnian system. Those interested may have their signatures carried too... scanned and transferred to CD-ROM. The Planetary Society's journal waxes lyrical: "Imagine your name flying first through the inner solar system, past Venus and your home world, then out past Jupiter to the enchantingly beautiful worlds of Saturn. There it will orbit for decades, until the spacecraft runs out of attitude-control fuel. Then *Cassini* will slowly begin to spin, gathering speed until it breaks apart. The CD-ROM will continue to orbit Saturn..." Wow. *The Rules:* sign the non-address side of a plain postcard, using dark ink. Send to: *Cassini* Program, JPL, 4800 Oak Grove Drive, Pasadena, CA 91109-8099, USA. Signatures accepted until 1 January 1 1997 or when the CD-ROM is full.

Publishing Bits. David Riley of *Beyond* magazine circularized (some) contributors, saying that issue 4 should appear this year, but that as a backlog-clearing measure he's returning all non-contracted stories. Sara Lefanu's *Writing Fantasy Fiction* (A & C Black, £8.99), with titanic insightfulness, recommends would-be authors to heed the regular Thog's Masterclass department in this very column.

Fanspeak. Another sf fan word has reached the wider world: "filk," originating in a typo and describing the fan practice of fitting new sf words to old tunes. Now a US editor reports that an acquaintance has been writing "Christian filksongs" for years, in ignorance of the word's vile origins, and was horrified to learn the sf connection. "Now she has to change the title of her new album, because her church considers science fiction to be a work of the devil."

Thog's Optical Masterclass. "Schulutski's body lay revoltingly supine, the distorted eyes staring up, like two accusing fingers, shrouded by a thick, pink glove." ("John E. Muller," *The Negative Ones*) "A slave with the hot brown skin of a Marzon and the twitching eyes of a man born under a variable star." (John Brunner, *Interstellar Empire*) "He blinked away the waves of blackness lapping at his ankles." (Richard Matheson, *The Shores of Space*) "He shook his head wearily, and let his eyes drop back to the streets below." "Then his eyes moved up along the rough tweed of his trousers to the shorter motion of his thighs." (Lester del Rey, "Uneasy Lies the Head" and "The Monster") "He swept the antechamber with the eyes of a trapped animal." (Poul Anderson, "Among Thieves")



The Human Factor

Paul J. McAuley

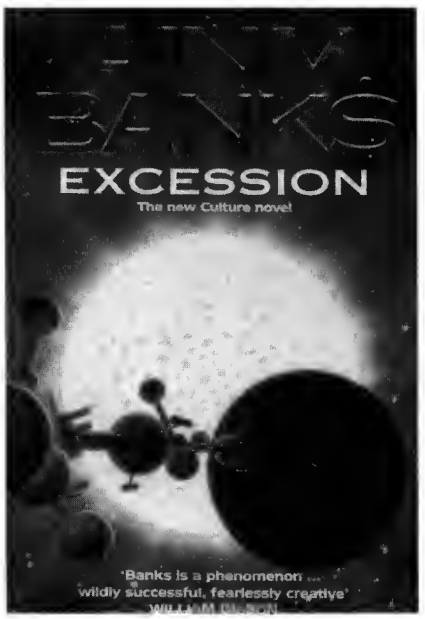
It is rumoured that Iain M. Banks may drop the distinction between his mainstream and his sf novels and in future publish all his fiction under the *nom de plume* Iain Banks. If so, ***Excession*** (Orbit, £15.99), the fourth in the loosely-knit Culture series, may be the last of his sf novels to be distinguished by his middle initial. A small difference, perhaps, but interestingly, the novel illustrates the difficulty of incorporating stories with a measure of deep psychological insight within the framework of traditional space opera.

Banks's Culture novels are set in a populous and busy galaxy presently dominated by an everchanging number of starfaring civilizations, with a wide variety of less-advanced client civilizations and worlds not yet brought into contact with the galactic milieu. The Culture itself is a refreshing and challenging alternative to the usual imperialist empires of space opera, being a loosely knit, inclusive and dynamic socialist utopia based mainly in vast intelligent spaceships and orbital habitats in which, given access to more or less unlimited energy, humans from a variety of worlds have formed a symbiosis with machine-based Minds. Utopias, even non-hierarchical utopias with virtually unlimited options for its inhabitants, tend to be fairly static, self-satisfied places. Banks's previous Culture novels have focused on volunteers recruited by the Special Circumstances division of the Culture to solve knotty ethical problems of contact, interference or war with less evolved civilizations (slyly ironic parodies of the militaristic or imperialistic empires of traditional space opera which invariably come off worse against the decadent but savvy Culture). *Excession*, however, pits the Culture against antagonists that are its coevals, and reveals considerably more about the internal politics of the Culture than its predecessors.

An excession is anything external to the Culture which can threaten it. *The* Excession of the title is a perfect black body sphere the size of a small mountain which may be the key to the secret of navigating between universes. Passively or aggressively resisting all attempts at analysis, it becomes the centre of a crisis between the Culture and a fearlessly aggressive race, the Affronters, which the Culture has been fostering towards full membership of the galactic club.

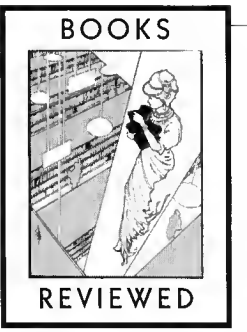
Byr Genar, a diplomat assigned to the Affronters, is seconded to Special Circumstances on a mission to talk with the captain of the starship which made contact with the Excession on its first appearance two and a half thousand years ago around a star 50 times older than the Universe. The captain is presently stored in suspended animation aboard an eccentric ship, *Sleeper Service*, and Byr will have the help of another eccentric, *Grey Area*, which specializes in extracting information from organic brains of primitive cultures to furnish its black museum of atrocities. Byr, a serial philanderer who has always run from complications caused by his promiscuity, must now confront an old lover living aboard the *Sleeper Service*, who has remained pregnant with their child for the last 40 years. Meanwhile, another branch of Special Circumstances recruits a shallow self-regarding girl to seduce Byr; the Affronters, at the borders of whose Empire the Excession has appeared, plan to confront the Culture with the aid of a traitor; and various factions within the Culture, as well as a splinter group, the Elench, plot to turn the McGuffin of the Excession towards their own ends.

Excession is intricately plotted, braiding a human tragedy into a larger canvas on which starships and drones play the major role. Banks has plundered sf's vast storehouse of tropes with an unalloyed ebullience, investing the usual furniture of space opera – massive starships, interstellar warfare, querulous robots, aliens – with an abundance of inventive energy informed by a canny wit. There are colourful set-pieces within alien environments and a variety of Culture orbitals, flame wars on the interstellar network which links various factions of the spaceship-based Minds, space battles, and diverse alarums and excursions. But while *Excession*'s portrayal of the Culture's multiplicity is richly detailed, and there is a satisfying plethora of reversals, revelations and plot twists, the human dimension of the story diminishes as the narrative progresses. Banks signals that his main interest may lie elsewhere by a set-piece early in the novel, in which a drone struggles to survive or at least pass on a warning when an Elench ship is taken over by the Excession: there's not a human in sight, and yet the story is vital and urgent and has a brilliantly subtle resolution that pays off much later. However, the foregrounding of the human part of the story, in which Byr is led towards confrontation with his estranged lover, leads to expectation of a denouement which, after a not particularly convincing revelation about Byr's mission, happens entirely offstage during the hectic conclusion when the other plot strands are pulled together.



Banks may have meant to use this as an illustration of the unbridgeable dichotomy between the muddle of human affairs and the Minds who effectively care for them, but in the process he fudges the resolution of the human story. And given that the main focus of the novel (and Banks expertly misdirects the reader) is elsewhere, it is a small but telling flaw, and suggests that Banks is marking the limit to which the psychodramas of mundane fiction can be incorporated within the framework of sf. But on its own terms *Excession* is wildly enjoyable, an all-out romp orchestrated with masterful precision, grounded upon challenging ethical problems concerning distinction between imperialism and benevolent interference, and furthering Banks's reputation as one of the most inventive writers of sf to have emerged in the last ten years.

Philip Pullman's ***The Golden Compass*** (Knopf, $20), the first volume of a fantasy trilogy with the overall title of *His Dark Materials*, was first published in Britain last year as a children's book (it won the Guardian Children's Fiction prize), but Knopf are aiming it squarely at the mass market. And



well they might. For although at heart *The Golden Compass* is a coming-of-age narrative told with a beguiling clarity, it is also crammed with virtues that engage more mature readers: a tough, brave and resourceful heroine; a richly-imagined alternative history in which magic is the primary mode of natural philosophy, and humans are each symbiotically bonded to a shape-changing daemon whose form becomes fixed at adulthood; and an intricate story told in a fastidiously direct yet transparent and evocative prose.

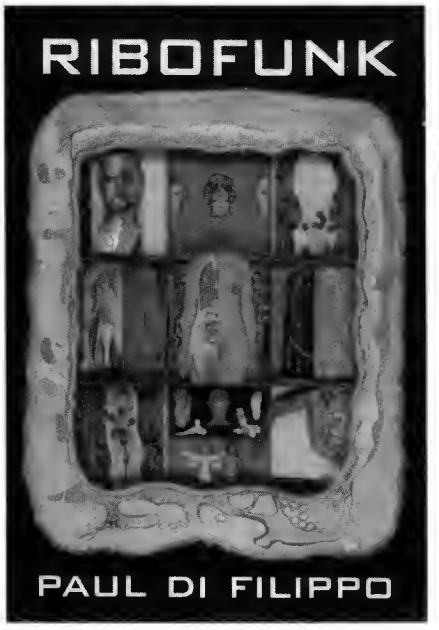
The heroine is Lyra Belacqua, a pre-adolescent foundling who has been brought up by the scholars of Jordan College, Oxford, but who is happier running wild with her daemon familiar and her gang of servants' children than attending to the scholars' fusty lessons. She saves her uncle, Lord Asriel, from an assassination attempt on his return from a polar expedition, and is drawn into a series of adventures revolving around the mysterious gobblers, who are kidnapping children for use in experiments attempting to harness the power of the mysterious dust which (as explained by a rather wonky invocation of quantum theory and the nature of the aurora) falls into the polar regions from between alternate universes.

Lyra's Dickensian world, from the high tables of Oxford colleges through gyptian encampments to the harsh polar wastes of the kingdom of the armoured bears, who have been beguiled into aiding the gobblers, is convincingly evoked, and Lyra is a believable, well-rounded heroine, intelligent, contrary, pugnacious and imaginative. Although Lyra has the traditional singular power gifted to heroines (or heroes) of fantasy tales (particularly foundlings or orphans), in her case it is slyly two-edged: she alone can make use of an alethiometer to divine the future, but the answers it provides are bafflingly cryptic, and (particularly in the subplot involving her championing of the deposed king of the armoured bears) she must rely as much on her wits as her special power. The resolution, involving revelations about Lyra's parentage which recast the told tale with a satisfying although somewhat telegraphed twist, is suitably apocalyptic, and boosts the narrative towards the second volume, which will be set in our own universe.

In the wide field of fantasy, at present overgrown with thickets of too often commercially inspired and clichéd whimsy concerning telepathic dragons or cats, sword and sorcery, urban elves or cod-Renaissance romances, *The Golden Compass* is a genuine original. Knopf's edition is beautifully produced, but British readers shouldn't be ashamed to search out the paperback edition on the shelves of children's literature.

The arc of an sf writer's career commonly begins in the proving ground of the short-story market, continuing through novels and, if she's not careful, an endgame desire to unify her disparate work into a single entity, or dissipation in the arid zones of sharecropping. It's typical of Paul Di Filippo's iconoclasm that he has resisted the usual career path, and as a consequence he is perhaps less well known than he deserves. ***Ribofunk*** (Four Walls Eight Windows, $20) is only his second book, but this collection of loosely-linked short stories repays your attention.

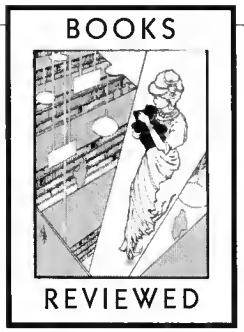
The 13 stories (two first published in *Interzone*) are set in a future dominated by biotechnology, where humans are served by smart transgenic animals and the protein police hunt down infractions of the genetic code. They borrow from cyberpunk narrative compression and *film noir* settings, and range from Runyonesque squibs ("One Night in Television City") through hardboiled crime fictions in which a private eye reverses the usual narrative direction by becoming a police officer ("The Boot," "Blankie," "The Bad Splice"), to a glimpse of a posthuman future ("Distributed Mind"). They are smart and funny and dense with invention, and their irreverent sarcasm burlesques the moronic inferno of contemporary America to fine effect. They are highly recommended.



Robert Silverberg, even when he is coasting, has never written anything other than smoothly finished prose. ***Starborne*** (Bantam, $22.95) is certainly smoothly narrated, but it never rises above its clichéd scenario. A sophisticated but terribly weary Earth sunken in self-satisfied ennui has sent out a starship to search for suitable planets to colonize, in a last attempt to revitalize the human race. But the crew is riddled with ennui too, and most of the novel is taken up with the fretting of the starship's captain and his unrequited lust for the telepath who, via her twin sister, is the only link between the starship and Earth (a device lifted whole from Heinlein's 1956 juvenile, *Time for the Stars*). The telepathic link is threatened by mysterious interference. Two life-bearing planets are discovered: one has a morphic field which drives humans mad; the other is covered by a vast vine in which giant worms endlessly tunnel; both would seamlessly fit into the lurid pulp stories Silverberg churned out in the 1950s. The source of the interference is discovered; the captain comes to terms with his fate; there's a brief note of unearned transcendence in the ending. It is a five-finger exercise of a novella padded out with copious stage directions, better written than 90 per cent of American sf but as bland as unflavoured yoghurt.

Like Silverberg, Cherry Wilder takes a stock sf situation – a starship crash-landed on an alien planet – but ***Signs of Life*** (Tor, $23.95) is a knotty, subtle and satisfying book, with skilfully handled multi-stranded narration and well-rounded characterization. A starship breaks up and various lifecraft land on various parts of an uncharted world. One contains a mix of starship crew, including compliant androids, a family media team, and a paramilitary maintenance corps, and the novel focuses on the struggle between the paramilitaries and the rest as all of them try and make sense of their surroundings.

The alien semi-tropical island on which the lifeboat crashlands is much like its equivalent on Earth, except for otter-like creatures which show signs of sentience, and the only monsters are those in the castaways' imaginations. Instead of exploring an alien fantasia, Wilder is concerned with showing how easily, once moral authority is removed, civilization can break down through loss of communication and consequent misunderstandings. In this, the novel echoes Golding's *Lord of the Flies* and its



tribes of choirboys reverting to savagery until rescued by adult authority. Wilder's characters, however, redeem themselves by asserting their own values over the defunct routines of starship service. Thus, when a sailing ship does arrive – for the world, Rhomary, has been previously colonized by another set of human castaways (and is the setting for several of Wilder's short stories and her novel *Second Nature*) – its crew is not bent on rescue but is hoping for renewed contact with interstellar civilization. Instead, they must unite with the starship crew and overcome the paramilitary corps which in a more conventional sf novel would have blasted its way to a solution, pausing along the way, of course, to organise the wreck into a fortress and the women into breeding units. Pointedly, the starship's captain is rescued only after reconciliation is reached and a new order achieved.

Wilder beautifully evokes the casual jargon, camaraderie and routines of the lower orders of the crew, the suppression of self-expression required by duty, and its slow awakening in the aftermath of the disaster – the aggression of the paramilitary corps is a denial of the loss of the framework in which that duty makes sense. *Signs of Life* is notable for the psychological depth of its depiction of ordinary people caught up in a situation out of their control, and the sly subversion of its narrative, in which those ordinary people make a difference.

Paul J. McAuley

Consider Her Ways

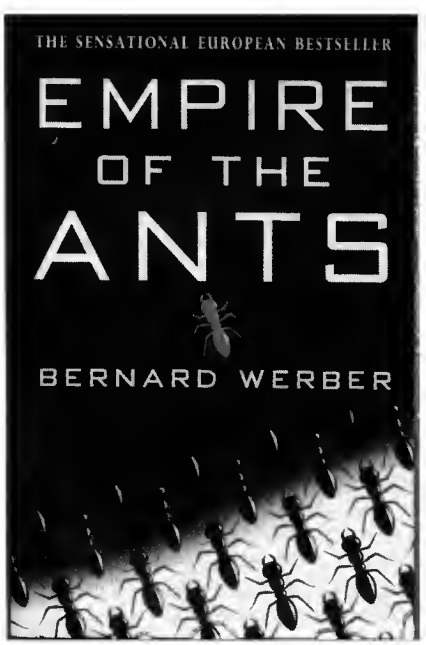
Chris Gilmore

There's a long tradition of dramatizing the lives of social insects "from the inside," combining accurate accounts of their organization, activities and life-cycle with the conceit that their intelligence and emotions are equivalent to (however unlike) the human. It's been done with mixed success by Lord Dunsany, T. H. White, Ursula Le Guin and most famously the Brothers Capek; Frank Herbert stood it deftly on its head in *Hellstrom's Hive*. The scope for unflattering comparisons and contrasts with human society is obvious – often too obvious – so that much of the resulting satire is jejune. There's only so much that you can imply about the unselfish, socialist arthropod's moral superiority to the self-serving, hedonistic primate, or about that of the artistic, affectionate individually unique primate to the joyless, loveless, ruthless automaton which represents such a sad degradation of the ancestral, solitary proto-wasp.

Bernard Werber has therefore set himself an uphill task in ***Empire of the Ants*** (Bantam, £9.99) which presupposes that global warming will allow exotic tropical types to migrate to France, upsetting the inter-species balance of power. The result is an upsurge of formic inventiveness as the immigrant and indigenous armies clash near Fontainbleu. Werber presents the viewpoints of a male, a female and a neuter soldier who band together against invaders from without and conspiracy within.

Meanwhile, and in parallel, a basement flat once owned by an entomologist named (in obvious *hommage* to HGW) Edmond Wells appears to have a sinister secret in its cellar. This is investigated, first by Wells's family, then by firemen and the police, the set-up coming more and more to resemble the sort of tricks which scientists play on such experimental animals as ... ants.

The stories come together in a satisfactory climax, but this book exists for its ornamentation more than its narratives. The human sections are bridged by extracts from Edmond Wells's *Encyclopedia of Relative and Absolute Knowledge*, wherein ant/human parallels are drawn, while in the ant sections formic military maxims are presented. These look very like (and may actually be) those of Sun Tzu, proving that some truths are universal. Less effective is Werber's running symbol for lateral thinking, a well known matchstick puzzle which everyone is supposed to find very difficult. I know two solutions to it, but only one is referred to, which rather vitiates the point.



Even so, there's plenty of fun to be had with this book, most of all, I imagine, if you're an entomologist. For me there was a certain frustration in not always being sure which behaviours were logical extrapolations of what is already done, and which were leg-pulls. Aho! The answer lies in my own hands: "Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise."

Some books plead to be admired for their art, some for their artifice. The distinction hinges on whether the maxim *ars celare artem* is applied (however ineptly) or flouted (however gracefully). Gill Alderman does a bit of both in ***The Memory Palace*** (Voyager, £5.99) by making a writer her central character, and presenting plenty of his writing.

Christopher Guy Young (aka Guy Parados) is the author of a sword-and-sorcery series, well enough done but thoroughly conventional except that its central, first-person character is a magician (to whom he has attached the name of Koschei the Deathless, though he resembles neither the Russian original nor Cabell's travesty) rather than an innocent or a hero. The series has made him, by his middle years, more than comfortably off; apart from the financial rewards, he finds attractive women thrill to the prospect of "sleeping with his books," and avails himself freely. (So now you know why so many hacks dabble in S&S – I wonder how often it works.) But the real world and fantasy are beginning to overlap; analogues are appearing between them (explicably enough in some cases – he puts somewhat of himself and his families into his art, and his fans sometimes feed him his own lines) but the question of which has primacy is beginning to arise. Is he creator or creature?

At first the manifestations are only mildly disturbing, but in the wake of a terrible accident (except that it may



not really be accidental) he finds himself helpless in a world of witchcraft, which seems to be inhabited (and perhaps controlled) by his own creations, most notably avatars of the women in his life. From there he is presently transported to oppose Koschei, his own principal avatar (a great red horse is another), in the world of Malthassa, which he certainly has created (unless perchance he was created there).

The quality of the writing is consistently high, especially in the descriptive passages, but the main problem with this book is lack of continuity and design. Though the pace is soporific at times, I constantly felt as if I'd lost my place as Alderman piled in yet more characters, and referred to yet more incidents, all of them familiar to Young in one aspect or other, but not to the reader. Meanwhile, there's no sense that the misfortunes that befall him serve any real purpose, nor that he either is or ought to be doing anything in particular about them; he's too much the victim of circumstance. Even when he becomes a healing demiurge opposed to Koschei's aspect as Lord of Blight it's through no action or intention of his own, but in simple reaction; that aspect of Koschei has become dominant, and must be countered. The action declines into a stately dance of arbitrarily chosen symbols, whose ever more frequent transformations rapidly lose interest.

To be caught up in events outside our control is the general lot of mankind, but that reflection doesn't really serve here – Young is too obviously a person of significance, in his own eyes and those of everyone he meets, to come the Unknown Soldier. As the book wore on I got an ever stronger impression that Alderman had originally tried to write straight S&S, became dissatisfied with how it was going, and cannibalized the incomplete MS into something that can be viewed as an allegory of the difficulties confronting the fledgling writer who creates his own world or an *hommage* to Dennis Potter. In either case I applaud her ingenuity but cannot altogether recommend the result.

I tend to the view that if a book's protagonists are adolescent or younger for most or all of its span, that book ought to be a juvenile. Such is the case with Michael Kandel's ***Panda Ray*** (St Martin's Press, $20.95), but its tone is so dark that I don't entirely convince myself. Terry Bisson's back-cover blurb compares it to R. A. Lafferty's *The Reefs of Earth*, and I take his point, but its assumptions remind me even more strongly of Lesley Howarth's excellent *MapHead* (reviewed in *Interzone* 96).

Ten-year-old Christopher Zimmerman and his sister Kaelin are aliens, or perhaps mutants, with psi powers (and for good measure omicron and upsilon powers as well). In the tradition which stretches back through *Children of the Atom* and Mark Clifton's Crazy Joey stories to *Odd John*, the family must pass for human lest they arouse the paranoia and xenophobia of us ordinary types, but Christopher has a loose tongue and has let it run away with him at school. Tough, though not really very tough, as should push come to shove the whole family could decamp to a parallel universe and set up as before – except that Debra, the matriarch, doesn't see it that way.

Debra is the source of all the book's emotional power but brings about its ultimate downfall, for she is an egregiously weak plot-mechanism. Security-conscious to a psychotic extent, she is quite prepared to order that Christopher be stripped of his omicron and upsilon (the equivalent of lobotomy, and it leaves you wonderfully well adjusted to boot) or even killed rather than risk exposure.

Hence the darkness of the tone, for a murderous mother is the ultimate denial of all that is natural and wholesome; even those pious parents who mutilate or slay their children lest they embrace some heresy, paganism or inappropriate sexual partner are most often fathers. Hence also the weakness, since (as her own parents admit) she has no rational motivation, and there is nothing religious in the book's tone, despite the unfulfilled hint of Christopher's uncompromisingly Christian forename and archetypally Jewish surname. "Gramps," Debra's elderly father, who helps Christopher escape, is a bit of a Dirty Old Man, but no one, least of all his late wife (whom he still visits by time-travel), censures him for that. Debra's madness is thus pure, and the more horrifying but the less believable.

So Christopher and Gramps flee into uncharted dimensions, and we're all set for a thrilling chase – except that here the book falls to pieces. I report this with deep regret, for Michael Kandel has many virtues: his accounts of how upsilon and omicron are deployed are ingenious and delightful; his descriptions of the children's sad conspiracy against the unnatural horror of their mad mother tear the heartstrings; I will forever be indebted to him for his central conceit, which revolves round a relationship between the equations $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$ and $a^2 + a = 1$ which may be familiar to the more mathematically inclined but was new to me; but on the present showing he has no idea how to advance a narrative.

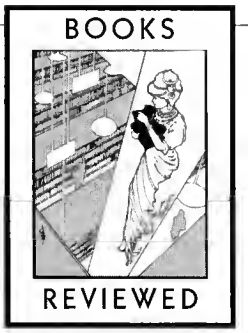
Panda Ray, the eponymous magus, gets a huge fanfare which he signally fails to live up to, and for much of the book we're reduced to watching Christopher mooching about in the wrong world, doing good and evil deeds which will all ultimately be cancelled, while no one tries to find him except some stooges who don't know what they're looking for. Kandel seems aware of this, and resorts to two standbys of the desperate: metamorphic writing and the compilation of lists (neither works).

The conclusion, such as it is, is deeply depressing: Christopher doesn't get his Greek letters scooped out, but he behaves just as if they had been, that being the only way he can be reconciled to psycho Debra, who is neither humbled, cured nor reformed. Everything worth playing for has been lost, but everyone is expected to celebrate the victory as powers which could create Heaven, Hell or a whole lot of fun are dedicated to sharpening pencils for a crossword addict. Not a juvenile, I conclude; such an immoral book should be kept well away from children.

The theme of sex, with or without love, between mortal and supernatural beings goes back to Homer; but when it occurs in the modern world it's a convention that quite apart from whatever grief the relationship entails, the human protagonist will be vexed by his or her peers, who refuse to believe in such things. Treatments vary in seriousness from the melodrama of A. A. Attanasio's *The Moon's Wife* to the arch whimsy of *I Dream of Genie*, with Bradley Denton's ***Lunatics*** (St Martin's Press, $22.95) coming somewhere in between.

Jack, the 30-something hero, is surely a very attractive man. Three of his former girlfriends, Carolyn, Katy and Halle, have memories fond enough to want to help in his current double misfortune – that Natalie, his latest, has been killed in a crash, and he seems to be going crazy. Whenever the full moon rises he strips off in its light, no matter where he may be or who else is about, for such is the single demand of Lily, the Moon Goddess who has taken a fancy to him.

Unlike the more conventional sort of Moon Goddess, Lily is neither virginal nor fearsome; far from it, she's a kindly sex goddess who seeks, in so far as her limited understanding will allow, to do people good turns. Moreover, there being plenty of places where outdoor nudity has a good chance of going unseen, she presents no problems that a little forward



planning can't resolve. To avoid getting arrested Jack drives out to Halle's cabin in the woods accompanied by the three women and sundry menfolk, who rally round much as people used to rally round a friend who was tripping on LSD.

Carolyn is amusing herself with a dimmish toyboy, Katy's marriage is unsatisfactory on several levels and Halle, the least believable of the three, is a borderline nymphomaniac with what must be a unique fetish: "It had been a long time since she'd spent an entire night with someone who snored. *She'd missed it.*" (My italics.) All meet Lily, and find her for various reasons rather hard to take – her beauty, powers and carefree existence arouse envy, not least because they are so patently unearned.

Jack's weirdness and vulnerability bring everyone into closer and more emotionally charged proximity than their wont, giving scope for a comedy of sexual manners among the age-group born c. 1956-64; the effect is reminiscent of John Updike in a sunny mood or Woody Allen's *A Midsummer Night's Sex Comedy*, though a little more soap-operatic than either, and therein lies the book's major weakness. Unlike a soap a novel must end sometime, and Denton's is arbitrary and sentimental.

Another weakness lies in Lily's lack of context. She is conceived as a character, not a mere phenomenon, yet she visits Jack only one night a month with never a hint as to how she spends the other 27. That diminishes her depth and believability alike; being used purely as a plot mechanism, she is less effective in that role. It's a pity, because Denton's exploration of the tribulations of being 30-something, with youth receding but desire no less insistent, is presented deftly and with conviction. *Lunatics* is a lightweight celebration of humane values, but within those limits works well most of the time.

I have nothing whatever against Nancy Kilpatrick personally; but if I had, and was feeling really vindictive, I might have chosen to adorn the cover of her latest book, ***Child of the Night*** (Raven, £5.99), with the words (attributed to Robert W. Walker) "Move over Anne Rice for Nancy Kilpatrick." How crass a first impression can you make? The back features unexceptionable effusions from Poppy Z. Brite and Karl Edward Wagner, so someone must have *chosen* it.

I'll give Kilpatrick the benefit of the doubt; it may not have been her choice. Indeed, I can almost hear a tenth-rate marketing executive applying the wisdom of cars or detergents: "We're not pussy-footing about with this one. We're aiming to dislodge significant consumer-loyalty from the market-leader herself! Go for it, gang!" But she is responsible for the cumulatively perfunctory ambience of a book without a trace of class. The dim American heroine, Carol Robins, is drifting aimlessly around Europe in the wake of divorce from her superficial, bisexual husband and wondering when she'll manifest his AIDS. She finds Bordeaux unexciting, mainly because her French is limited to "Vin rouge, s'il vous plait," but she catches the eye of André, who is not only a vampire but a walking cliché – the sort of bisexual who, denying his homosexual aspect, expresses his consequent frustration in violent misogyny. Having very little self-control and no social grace, but being captivated by Carol, whose "slim hips, large breasts, firm ass (*sic*), chestnut hair, sapphire eyes" are all a total vulgarian could possibly want in a woman, he kidnaps her, rapes her regularly over a fortnight (to her great delight – yeah, it's that kind of book), then dumps her.

As he's obviously got the police in his pocket there's not a lot Carol can do, but once the morning sickness begins she decides he ought to pay for the abortion and toddles back to Bordeaux – where her troubles really begin. André lives communally with vampire friends of both sexes who all seem much nicer than he, but who bluntly tell her that she is his property. They also take a proprietorial interest in her child, whose qualities as a rare vampire/human hybrid they expect to overcome his unpromising parentage. (They're wrong, by the way; at nine he's obnoxious and ill-mannered in a boringly commonplace style.)

There's no reason why this shouldn't make a good story, but Kilpatrick doesn't bother; instead she idiot-plots. Once the child is born Carol is of no more use than an exhausted brood mare. So do they drain her and bury her somewhere on their large estate? No; they wipe her memory, give her $90,000 and dump her in England. Well, no harm done; the whole world is their playground, where should she start looking, even once she has her memory back? Aha! Someone who has every reason to tell her nothing hands over an important clue – just like that! And so on.

I could forgive even this if the writing were graceful, but it's at best workmanlike, often clumsy and peppered with the solecisms typical of those who care nothing for words – can for could, ova for ovum, who for whom, massive for spacious etc. When she wants to quote *Faust* Kilpatrick chooses a gruesome doggerel translation – not, I'm sure, from perversity but because it was closest to hand. Her attempts at colour are risibly flat:

> Trendy types, artists and actors brushed shoulders with hookers, drug addicts and derelicts, a general assortment of odd characters. On the streets people juggled, sold handmade jewellery, paintings and hot Walkmans, walked pit bulls and chihuahuas and performed mime shows. Bag ladies dressed in faded orange or yellow crêpe de Chine begged for coins ...

and so by the yard – or until the director bellows "It's a wrap!" and the extras all drift off for coffee and doughnuts.

The only points where this lamentably pedestrian book comes alive are the descriptions of clothes. If you really want to see the term "fashion statement" demonstrated, the scenes where André takes Carol shopping are perfect, but they don't justify the cover price.

Praising Poul Anderson's collection *All One Universe* a couple of months ago, I noted his penchant for the theme of hard decisions taken in full knowledge of the likely consequences. His recent novel, ***The Stars Are Also Fire*** (Tor, $5.99 and £4.99), features that on many occasions and at many levels to illuminate Anderson's dual view of the tragic: the classical, that it arises from the collision of noble but incompatible ideals, and the Faustian, that it arises when good men attempt to encompass good ends by bad means.

It's a big book, running to over 560 pages, covering events several generations apart and very hard sf throughout. Anderson presents a future with AIs, frozen sleep, downloaded personalities, genetically enhanced animals, genetically altered humans, nanotechnology and antimatter-powered intrasystem spaceflight, but no hyperspace, telepathy, tractor beams or similar trappings of traditional genre writing. Yet it's also typical Anderson, with scenes of diplomacy and espionage that hark straight back to his 1957 short story "Among Thieves" (though that story didn't include a sexual relationship between the protagonists) and a carefully envisaged rescue scene straight out of *The Enemy Stars*; the central McGuffin recalls *Satan's World*, the parallel areas of conflict reflect the concerns of the *Orbit Unlimited* stories, and his treatment of downloads shows a reconsideration of themes first tackled in "Call Me Joe" (also 1957).

In the latest generation a bucolic



Pacific culture of humans and enhanced seals is in desperate need of room to expand in an ocean which is entirely subject to prior claims, while the brilliant but fading culture of no longer quite human Lunarians faces mass immigration by unmodified Earthmen, who have found a way to colonize the Moon and breed there without becoming Lunarians themselves. The intrigue which involves these strange bedfellows is intercut with scenes from the life of Dagney Beynac, whose memory is revered by all parties as "The Mother of the Moon," is by now something near to a tutelary goddess, and who was present when the events vexing the current generation were set in motion.

So far, so conventional; but Anderson has always been interested in the development of language, and is still experimenting with it. The Lunarians have invented a language of their own, and he is at pains to ensure that (in contrast to the easy manners of the AIs) whenever one speaks his English is correct but a little awkward – the speech of an educated alien, attempting to approximate more nuances than are truly translatable. It is apparent that Lunarian is agglutinative and richer in emphatic particles than English, with more complex verbs of motion, but fewer auxiliary verbs, which is well enough; but I'm not convinced that patterns of language affect patterns of thought to the extent that Anderson presupposes, and there are times when minor female speakers especially cross the narrow boundary which separates an allowable taste for self-dramatization from the bombastic. Moreover, being a synthetic language it is highly regular, which makes for some awkward coinages when the narrative is written from their viewpoint: the words "dismissingly," "unlikeliness" and "vacantness" appear in place of "dismissively," "unlikelihood" and "vacancy"; I see the point, but the experiment doesn't work for me.

On the other hand, Anderson has frequently been criticized for using stereotyped female characters as mere plot-mechanisms to impel the males who carry the burden of advancing the story. Here he transcends that limitation with a carefully worked sexual/ideological conflict between the two women to whom Ian Kenmuir, the principal male, is attracted, counterpointed against the asexual but emotionally debilitating demands of the downloaded Dagney Beynac, to whom all the major contenders are offspring – physical, spiritual or both.

Personalities and events have their own dynamics. Anderson treats them with his customary integrity, which means that the final resolution is rather easy to predict, though no one could have predicted the emotional power of the scene where the two strands at last meet in a crypt on the Moon. That apart, this is a first-class philosophical thriller – a sub-genre unique to sf, and one which we apologists for the field tend to stress too little.

Chris Gilmore

It Isn't Really Working

James Lovegrove

The track record for works of fiction by celebrities-turned-authors has, let's face it, not been a distinguished one. Achievement in one area of the arts does not automatically translate into achievement in another, except perhaps in the minds of the celebrities, who have been conditioned by the blandishments of agents, sycophantic hangers-on, and others with a vested interest, to believe that everything they touch turns to gold. Hence the novels of Joan Collins, Rupert Everett, Janet Leigh, and others too numerous (and too ghastly) to mention – books whose sole merit lies in providing a useful rule of thumb for readers of fiction, namely that if a picture of the author appears on the front cover in lieu of a jacket illustration, that novel is best avoided.

For those celebrities who, God forbid, might be unsure of their literary talents, there is always the option of hiring a ghost writer, which enables the celebrity to take the credit for a work of fiction (and the lion's share of the royalties) without having to go to the bother of actually writing the thing. Step forward William Shatner and Naomi Campbell. Or there is the co-authorship route, and this is the one that has been chosen by Richard Dreyfuss, who, along with sf veteran Harry Turtledove, has penned ***The Two Georges*** (NEL, £5.99), an alternate-history tale set in a present-day America which lost the War of Independence and is still under the dominion of Great Britain.

It's a mildly intriguing premise, but it's scuppered by a hopelessly bland and uninspired plot. A painting by Gainsborough commemorating the peace accord struck between George Washington and George III is stolen by a separatist group calling themselves the Sons of Liberty, and it is up to Colonel Thomas Bushell of the Royal American Mounted Police to recover it in time for an imminent state visit by King Charles. Should the painting not be available for inspection when the king arrives, it is predicted that all sorts of dire political consequences will ensue. Naturally, there is a conspiracy involved, and even half-awake readers will spot the traitor-in-high-places the moment he appears.

But the real problem with *The Two Georges* isn't the dull story, or even the astonishingly turgid pace of Bushell's investigation (every journey he makes, every meal he eats, every conversation he takes part in, is rehearsed at length and in unnecessary detail). The real problem is that the premise has not been thought through to its logical conclusion. The year is 1996, yet people drive around in steam-powered cars, cross continents by airship, and talk and act in a cod-Victorian manner. That would be fine if, as in Moorcock's canny and witty "Oswald Bastable" trilogy, this were the present day as imagined from the point of view of a Victorian, but there is no such mediating narrative device in *The Two Georges*. Instead, we are supposed to accept that, with America unliberated, the world has remained culturally and technologically in a state of suspended animation. Worse, there are fundamental inconsistencies within the authors' world-building. Why, for instance, are cars steam-powered while planes and airships rely on combustion-driven propulsion? Has no one thought of applying the combustion process to land-based vehicles?

We are also expected to accept that the painting from which the novel takes its title is possessed of such a deep, intrinsic symbolic value that its theft and possible public desecration could destabilize not just America but America's relationship with her mother country. Hardly. Were, say, the original Declaration of Independence appro-

priated by terrorists, people might be upset but it wouldn't cause global ructions. Symbols are important, but they are not the things that truly bind nations together. As a McGuffin, the painting is too flimsy to support the significance the authors are at pains to invest it with.

Then there is the character of Bushell himself. A small man with a moustache (wonder who could play him in the movie adaptation?), Bushell is having a hard time getting over a divorce. To portray him as a tragic, obsessive, self-destructive figure, the authors have him ... take the occasional nip of whisky. That's it. We learn nothing further about him from his dialogue, which, like most the dialogue in the book, is restricted to half-hearted attempts at antiquated circumlocution or clipped, gritty, unenlightening aphorisms, and what we do learn about him from his reaction to adverse circumstances is of little or no interest.

Other characters present a broad swath of stereotypes which the authors have attempted to subvert with a singular lack of success. Blacks, in the world of *The Two Georges*, excel in clerical positions, but still remain subordinate to the white characters in both rank and narrative significance. An attempt to create a rounded, three-dimensional female character to provide the love interest for Bushell ends up saddling him with a nagging, irritating harpy. American Indians are the Hollywoodized *Dances With Wolves* version – inscrutable, a little intimidating, but basically noble – while the less said about an East Indian pathologist whose dialogue reads like Peter Sellers in full "Goodness gracious me!" mode, the better.

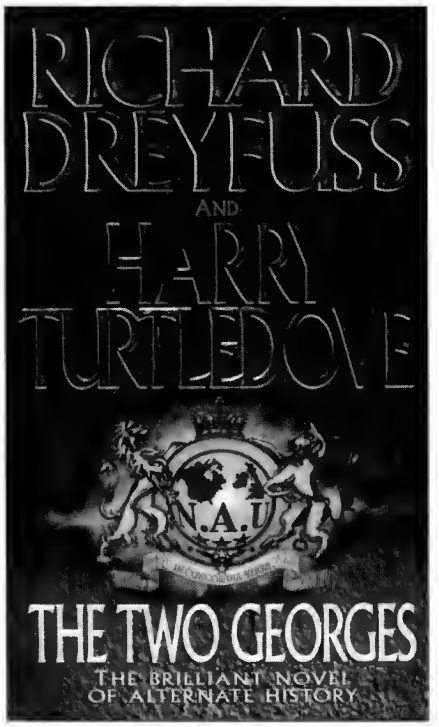
Reading *The Two Georges*, it is hard not to gather the impression that the authors are promoting the idea of America-as-colony *as a good one*, as if to say that everyone would have been better off had it not been for those pesky, meddling Revolutionaries. If their intentions in this respect are ironic, the irony is so deeply embedded as to be undetectable. One keeps expecting Bushell, *à la* Bastable, to undergo a Damascene conversion and realize that his rigidly regimented military existence and the ossified 19th-century attitudes of his times are wrong, but the closest he comes to exhibiting a conscience is a Dickensian pang of compassion over the plight of some Pittsburgh miners and their families.

The Two Georges is dreary, reactionary stuff, so clunkily written that one can only hope Dreyfuss will, in future, confine himself to acting. And possibly Turtledove, too.

In a little over a decade, cyberpunk has established a set of conventions as rigid and fixed as the sf traditions it originally undermined. Most of those conventions are present and correct in Alexander Besher's ***Rim*** (Orbit, £6.99): virtual worlds, street life, technologically enhanced humans, the dominance of Japanese culture. What Besher brings fresh to the material are elements of Eastern mysticism. Characters talk about chakras and past-life karma as if these are objective physiological realities, like cell-division and genetics, rather than part of a system of beliefs. Of course, as virtual reality gradually blurs the distinction between what is real and what is imagined, who is to say that the same won't happen to the distinction between the physical and the spiritual?

The plot, in brief, involves Frank Gobi, a Californian university professor and former private investigator, whose ten-year-old son's psyche gets sucked into a computer game. It turns out that the boy is not alone. The minds of thousands of people have become trapped in various virtual worlds created by the Satori Corporation, and it is up to Gobi to free them before the system overloads and crashes, and they are lost for ever.

The action moves fast, from California to an orbiting satellite hotel to Neo-Tokyo, a city that slips in and out between this world and a strange, multi-temporal limbo. Along the way Gobi encounters yakuza hitmen, androids, secret agents of various nationalities, Tibetan zombies, and samurai warriors, in a chase during which the borders between fact and computer-generated fantasy become increasingly elided. Throughout, Besher touches on interesting themes, but in all the rush nothing is explored in any depth. The story skips like a stone across a pool of ideas without raising anything but the smallest of splashes.



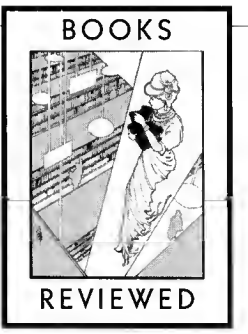
In spite of this, or perhaps because of this, *Rim* is an enjoyable read. With shifting typefaces and chunks of italicized text to keep you on your toes, and sly flashes of humour that sneak by so swiftly you might miss them if you aren't careful, it makes for an intriguing and slightly unusual offshoot of the cyberpunk family tree.

Three non-fiction books have been published recently which, amid the clamour generated by cyberjunkies who would have us believe that the future lies in being digital, sound a welcome note of caution.

The most readable of the three is ***Silicon Snake Oil*** (Doubleday, $22), and the ideas it contains have all the more validity for its author, Clifford Stoll, being a computer expert and self-confessed "network maven." Among the many objections Stoll raises to the prospect of a hooked-up, hardwired future, one is that the technobuff dream of eventually having every morsel of data in the world digitized is an unrealizable one. For one thing, there simply isn't that much memory space available, and for another, before the task has barely even been begun, the software and hardware employed will be outmoded and in need of upgrading, and the job will have to be started all over again, and so on and so on with Sisyphean futility *ad infinitum*. Not only that, but what happens when the storage mechanisms start to decay? Will everything have to be printed as hardcopy again in order to preserve it?

Stoll also points out instances where computerization has *not* benefited people or made data-retrieval easier, for example in libraries, where large sums of money that could otherwise have been spent on new books have instead been squandered on electronic filing systems which are in every respect inferior to, and less user-friendly than, the pre-existing card catalogue system.

Silicon Snake Oil is written in a chatty, informal style and filled with anecdotes and nuggets of opinion, although after a while its jokiness begins to grate and you find yourself longing for a little more substance. By contrast, in ***The War of the Worlds*** (Abacus, £9.99), Mark Slouka covers much the same ground, but with sombre, academic precision and gravitas.



Slouka is darkly funny as he describes the personality disorders that have manifested in otherwise sane people as a result of spending too much time in chat-rooms pretending to be somebody other than who they are – they experience difficulty in separating their website lives from their real lives, and find the freedom of the former infinitely preferable to the limitations of the latter. Equally wise and welcome are his stabs at the "hive mentality" promulgated by many techno-evangelists as the solution to mankind's problems, especially the problems created by the inconvenient human traits of free will and self-expression. Politically Correct PC-users who look forward to a future in which all members of the human race are permanently linked up to one another, and in which individual thought is censured or even disallowed by consensus opinion, and see this as a liberation from inequality, clearly have not considered the Orwellian implications.

Slouka also, rightly, decries the supremacism that underlies the arguments of those from mainly white, mainly wealthy countries who drive big-wheeled monster trucks full-tilt down the information superhighway, screaming at the slowpokes in their jalopies to get out of the way – would-be Rambos in nerds' bodies, freed from the constraints of their "meat" and thrilled to think that their time has come round at last. These are the same triumphal inadequates found in Mark Dery's ***Escape Velocity*** (Hodder & Stoughton, £16.99), which is an exploration more of the culture that has risen up around the digital revolution than of the revolution itself. Dery covers the gamut of cyberpunk-related topics from conceptual art to sf, Nine Inch Nails to *Mondo 2000* magazine. William Gibson is given due credit – his maxim "The street finds its own uses for things" is reiterated throughout the book as a kind of chorus – but unfortunately Dery attempts to bind too many disparate strands together under a single heading, and the book suffers from his inability to filter out the signal from the noise, or indeed draw any conclusions from the endless stream of facts, names, and events he spits out, machine-gun style.

Still, it's good to know that there are some intelligent people out there who haven't been swept up by all the cyber-hoohah; who haven't been taken in by the promises of unlimited information for all (that is, for all who can afford it – and anyway, what can one possibly *do* with all that information?); who dare to hold up a hand and say, "Hang on a moment..."

Some publishers, though, have not remained immune, and for wireheads who want to find out more about *Escape Velocity*, a website has been provided at http://www.well.com/user/markdery/. Go ahead. Plug into the machine.

James Lovegrove

Magazine Reviews

Andy Cox

Ironic, really, that one of the most respected small-press horror magazines, ***Peeping Tom***, is also one of the worst-looking. It's entirely due to the strength of its fiction, then, that it's been able to publish 22 issues to date, picking up two British Fantasy Awards along the way.

I've always been impressed by the fact that *Tom* has attracted regular contributions from "name" authors, even though much of the time they turn out to be the weakest. Issue 22 is no exception. There's a juvenile, almost embarrassing, aspect to Guy N. Smith's "Bonemeal," which brings together a bunch of aged cannibalistic Nazis... and that's *all* it does. Ben Leech's "Kill Pig Devil," a maniac killer's final rant, is slightly better, but even so I can't help thinking that if this had been a submission from an unknown author it would have received a rejection slip. As it is, weak efforts like these are keeping out work by those who would at least try a damn sight harder.

A short while ago I was asked in an interview about the importance in horror fiction of sustaining belief in the supernatural. I suggested that horror fiction is much more successful when it convinces us that events are perfectly natural. For me, there aren't enough of these stories in *Tom*, but thankfully there is one in this issue, towering above the dross. Mary Wallace's "Delight in Sacrifice" is the longest story here, but hardly a word is wasted as she takes care to introduce her characters (and I mean characters: these are believable people) and shows us what has made them who they are. This is a glorious piece of story-telling, with nary a hint of "horror" until the beautifully rendered denouement, where it comes across as a perfectly natural progression from what has gone before; it disturbs but it does not shock, and not even a hideously bad illustration giving the ending away can lessen its impact. You might want to buy the magazine for this story alone: £2.25, payable to "Peeping Tom Magazine" (A5, 52pp), from Yew Tree House, 15 Nottingham Road, Ashby de la Zouch, Leics LE65 1DJ (or £8 for four issues).

Night Dreams seems to have been around for ages, even though it's only just reached #4. Mind you, since Anthony Barker took over the editorship this year, it's been coming out on schedule and its appearance has improved 100 per cent. Editorial policy remains unchanged, however, and it is *Night Dream*'s intent to invoke the spirit of 1930s pulp fiction. I'm not qualified to judge if it's truly successful in this, but in the letters column Rhys Hughes seems to think the magazine immensely superior. Rhys Hughes also happens to be this issue's featured writer, and although "Burke and Rabbit" might not number amongst his very best work, it contains everything that makes him a worthy winner of the 1995 *Zene* Award for Best Fiction Writer: exuberance, imagination and a great deal of wit.

Elsewhere, "Man, Woman, Steam" by Peter Tennant (another *Zene* award) is, I imagine, archetypal *Night Dreams* fare: things are never quite what they seem, and that is as good a reason as any to introduce some grisly horror. Well-written and uncomplicated in the telling, the story is effective because it knows precisely what it is supposed to be. By contrast, Caitlin Burke's "A Rose in Spanish Harlem" attempts to be more than just another vampire story but never quite makes it, despite some evocative prose and an unusual setting. And if you're writing in Spanish you better make sure you get it right!

In his editorial Anthony Barker says this is the best issue yet. If he can find time between his Spanish lessons, I



have a feeling that he'll be able to say the same thing about many future issues. A4, 44pp, £2.80, or £10.50 four issues, payable to "K. S. King," 47 Stephens Road, Walmley, Sutton Coldfield, W. Midlands B76 2TS. Subscribers receive a free copy of Kirk S. King's novella "Booger."

Meanwhile, ***Threads*** has been quietly publishing traditional science fiction for ten issues now, editor Geoff Lynas championing the work of many underrated writers and Neal Asher in particular – "Asher's Back!!!" it says on the cover of #10. His story, "The Bacon," has none of the "concomitant technology" (to quote his own letter) of his previous *Threads* story "Just Pigs." Some of the other writers here could use Asher's offworld piloting skills; faced on take-off with "Hardy had been on Morne for barely two minutes, when he was almost killed by an alien," I'm already reaching for the barf bag. Jessica Anderson, on the other hand, roped me into "The Hunting of the Snark" immediately, and I enjoyed the hunt immensely. Unfortunately, Jessica lost interest in her story once the snarks were captured, and it just fell apart after that. She did manage to weave some convincing near-future technology seamlessly into the plot, however, and obviously the most successful stories here do likewise. There are also a few good stories that employ no gadgetry at all, and Roger Keen's "North," though not stunningly original, is probably the best of these.

A few poems are scattered throughout the issue, most notably two by Andy Darlington, whose "Discussing Death, Deviance and Diners/Let Sleeping Dogs Lie" is wonderful. Some good illustrations (Russell Morgan, Alan Casey) and fine presentation make *Threads* a great little package, especially for the trad sci-fi fan. It deserves a higher profile. A5, 60pp, £2.50, or £9 four issues, payable to "First Rung Publications," 32 Irvin Avenue, Saltburn-by-the-Sea, Cleveland TS12 1QH.

It's not all fiction in the small press, by the way, and Alan Baker has timed perfectly the launch of ***Phoenix: Encounters with the Unexplained***, a cornucopia of snippets and in-depth articles on all aspects of the paranormal. Issue 2 wonders "What Crashed at Kecksburg?", takes a look at the outrageous "Castrators of Russia" and in "Spooks" delves into the murky world of psychic espionage. That all these well-researched articles are by Alan Baker himself will give you a clue as to the sheer hard work he's putting into this magazine. He does have able support, though, this time from the likes of Tom Baldwin (on levitation) and Marion K. Pearce (an ongoing series, "Elements in Mythology"), and interspersed throughout the magazine are fascinating news reports of all things weird, making this, as I said elsewhere about the debut issue, a delight to dip into as well as study at length.

If my coverage of *Phoenix* is brief, it is because I consider it above criticism. If you enjoy *Fortean Times* you will surely enjoy this. A5, £2.50, or £14 for six issues (bimonthly), payable to "Alan Baker," 60 The Upper Drive, Hove, E. Sussex BN3 6NE.

Someone else picking up some worthy praise is **Auslander Press**, publishers of a unique little magazine of fiction and non-fiction, each issue of which is dedicated to a different theme. Number 3 is "suggested for mature readers" and has "BANNED" stamped right across the cover, for the theme is censorship. The cover's just a gimmick of course, and there's nothing here that would cause it to be banned from anywhere, or indeed anything that would warrant any sort of advisory warning. Which is a pity, because there was a real opportunity here to challenge and provoke instead of merely list over-familiar examples of censorship in action and declare how terribly unfair it all is. Preaching to the converted anyway, I suspect. Mind you, in his rather insipid (in the circumstances) guest editorial David Logan says censorship might even be for the common good and "the censorship that functions in our societies is of the most innocuous kind." Me, I don't consider repression to be innocuous.

I would have liked to have seen more discussion and less fiction (it's okay but I doubt any of it was penned with this issue in mind), and especially lacking is the first-hand viewpoint of those who have actually fallen foul of the censor. Still, slightly disappointed though I am with this issue, I recommend that you get to know the publishers. They are putting out some original and varied material, and lots of it. A5, 60pp, £3, or £10 four issues, payable to "Auslander Press," 72 Tewkesbury Road, Longford, Glos GL2 9EH.

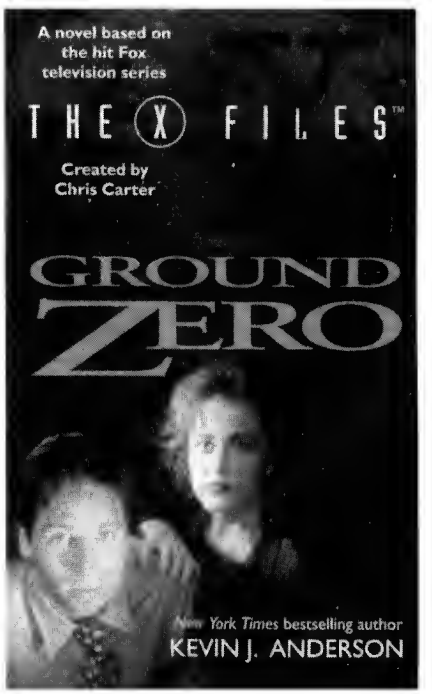
Andy Cox

The Vision Thing

Neil Jones

As *Interzone*'s "Books Received – Spinoffery" column shows, increasingly it's the visual media that drive sf publishing: novels set in the universe of *Star Trek*, *Alien* – or whatever TV series, film, or even comic will sell. There must be all sorts of reasons for their popularity, but an important one is surely that because the main characters and the background are known and familiar, the reader is not entering a completely new (and possibly uninspiring) world – and the "hard work" of visualization is already done. Readers of "pure" sf may be scornful, but even they aren't immune: trilogies outsell novels – which are much, much more popular than the struggling short story.

The latest launchpad for spinoffery is *The X-Files*, which has tapped into conspiracy theory with such flair and savvy it has become both a hit series and a cult at the same time. Superb production values and teasingly enigmatic storylines pull you in without



ever quite delivering those mysterious aliens. Now, writing an *X-Files* novel ought to be straightforward: find a good plot, and let two characters name-tagged Mulder and Scully ferret out as little of what's going on as you can get away with. So far only two writers have tried their hand at this: Charles Grant, with his two paperback originals, *Goblins* and *Whirlwind*; and Kevin J. Anderson, with the hardback ***Ground Zero*** (Voyager, £9.99) – now also out in mass-market paperback at £5.99. Maybe that's because it isn't as easy as it looks – because, thanks to the programme's distinctive nature, the writer has to deliver that dark, edgy atmosphere ... and avoid turning screen gold into prose lead.

In the Anderson book, Mulder and Scully are called in when a nuclear weapons researcher is killed in a nuclear explosion. Straightforward? – not quite: the radioactive charred corpse was found in an otherwise intact office. Naturally, since Mulder and Scully are dealing with an ultra-secret defence department, no one will tell them what is going on and the two have to try and piece the truth together. (One of the TV series' shrewdest touches is the way its FBI viewpoint characters are kept on a need-not-to-know basis, always locked out of the inner circle of secrets.) So Scully follows up an anti-nuclear protest group at nearby Berkeley, which brings back uncomfortable memories of her student days when she flirted with joining the movement herself (– before signing on the dotted line with the not-quite-as-radical FBI). After several more mysterious deaths (most of them all too obviously there to pad out the book) the pair head off into the eye of a hurricane and a Pacific island, where they finally find a solution of sorts – and, yes, it's satisfying enough – to the mystery.

Ideas-wise the book easily passes muster – after alien visitation, nuclear bombs are a good bet to produce the paranoia required for your average X-File – but there's only enough plot for a novella, and, no, Anderson's routine prose doesn't come close to evoking the spooky feel of the TV series. Still, if you're an *X-Files* addict, and you really, really want your Mulder and Scully in print ... the book is out there.

For sheer visual power, there can't be many sf films to rival *Blade Runner*; its images of a dark, eroding future landscape have been etched into our collective consciousness. So it's surprising that there's never been a sequel to it, not in film and not in print, until now. But ***Blade Runner 2: The Edge of Human*** by K. W. Jeter (Orion, £15.99 and £5.99) is actually a double-sequel – a follow-up both to the film and also, so the dust jacket claims, to *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, the Philip K. Dick novel the film was based on (well, sort of), because Jeter has set out to resolve some of the discrepancies between the two.

In many ways, it's a classy job. First, he's used the key events of the film to set up his plot-arc, and has also found some ingenious and satisfying ways of recycling the "original" cast of characters. You meet Rick (Harrison Ford) Deckard again, naturally, and (just) Rachael, his android lover. But you also encounter the replicants Roy Batty and Priss; Sebastian and his puppet-creatures; a Tyrell at the head of the Tyrell corporation, and various other Blade Runners, including Dave Holden – he's the one shot by a replicant near the beginning of the film. The key theme of the original film – what is the dividing line between real and artificial humanity? – is still around, too. It's not all good news: by the end you'll be very, very tired of pathologically determined characters who've OD-ed on old Cagney/Bogart movies. Still, without their snarling refusal of any help no matter how badly they need it the plot might collapse into novella length. The prose, however, is worth the price of admission in itself, and seamlessly conjures up the film's near-future bleakness of landscape and spirit. ...Perhaps for his next project Jeter should try his hand at an *X-Files* book.

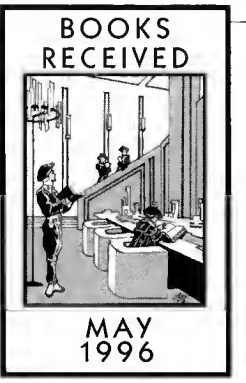


Babylon 5 is also a cult show – well, at least it is in the UK; apparently US audiences haven't fallen head-over-heels for it the way people have here. Which is probably why ***Creating Babylon 5*** (Boxtree, £13.99) and ***The A to Z of Babylon 5*** (Boxtree, £8.99) are both by Englishman David Bassom. What makes the series so popular? Well, part of its appeal must be its five-season story arc, with its main characters, including exotic aliens, making their alliances and facing off for a universe-shaking climax still three seasons away. Also, it's done (and done impressively) on a much smaller budget than its main rival, the formidable *Star Trek* franchise – it has made impressive use of CGI effects: that cylindrical space station on the book's cover only exists inside a computer.

If you want to read more about it – at least the first two seasons – *Creating Babylon 5* has background articles, character profiles, interviews and a lot of other intriguing stuff, plus some excellent photos. The *A to Z*, by contrast, is only for real *Babylon 5* devotees. While the entries seem informative and accurate, the photos are routine and confined to the centre pages and the book could have done with having more visual material scattered through it – diagrams of the station and the hardware, for example, and drawings of the various alien races.

And be warned – if creator J. Michael Straczynski's series is completed after five full seasons, then there will have to be later – and much bigger – editions of both books. Still, what both titles show is just how much detail and texture Straczynski has already put into the series. It's an impressive achievement – and a detailed vision of a future; there'll be no shortage of people wanting to spend more time in it. Here's wishing him luck for a full five-year run.

Neil Jones



The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone *during the month specified above. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.*

Aldrin, Buzz, and John Barnes. **Encounter with Tiber.** "The epic novel of discovery and destiny." Foreword by Arthur C. Clarke. Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-624S0-7, ix+S60pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Sf novel, first edition; yet another famous astronaut writes an sf book...) *13th June 1995.*

Baird, Wilhelmina. **Clipjoint.** Penguin/Roc, ISBN 0-4S-118S58-7, 325pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1994; sequel to *Crashcourse*; "Wilhelmina Baird" is a pseudonym of British author Joyce Hutchinson.) *30th May 1996.*

Ballard, J. G. **Rushing to Paradise.** Picador USA, ISBN 0-312-1341S-0, 239pp, B-format paperback, cover by Calvin Chu, $12. (Non-sf [but near-sf] novel by a leading sf writer, first published in the UK, 1994; reviewed by James Lovegrove in *Interzone* 90; "Picador USA" is an American imprint "used by St Martin's Press under license from Pan Books Limited.") *May 1996.*

Belle, Pamela. **The Wolf Within.** Pan, ISBN 0-330-34788-8, 4S8pp, A-format paperback, cover by Mike Posen, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 199S.) *10th May 1996.*

Benford, Gregory. **Matter's End.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-S75-06298-3, 294pp, hardcover, cover by Bob Eggleton, no price shown. (Sf collection, first published in the USA, 1994; it contains 21 stories; the lead item is the memorable little piece "Freezeframe," but there is no mention of the fact that the story first appeared in *Interzone* ... grrr.) *20th June 1996.*

Bibby, James. **Ronan's Rescue: Further Translations from the Original Gibberish.** Orion/Millennium, ISBN 1-8S798-268-4, 261pp, hardcover, cover by Yvonne Watson, £1S.99. (Humorous fantasy novel, first edition; there is a simultaneous C-format paperback edition [not seen]; the author's second novel, a follow-up to *Ranan the Barbarian*, it has a cover commendation from comedian Lenny Henry.) *17th June 1996.*

Bradley, Rebecca. **Lady in Gil.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-S75-062S9-2, 286pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; this appears to be a debut book by a Canadian author, born 1952, who recently has been resident in Hong Kong.) *8th August 1996.*

Brin, David. **Brightness Reef: Book One of a new Uplift Trilogy.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-385-9, 705pp, A-format paperback, cover by Fred Gambino, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 199S; reviewed by Ken Brown in *Interzone* 103.) *13th June 1996.*

Britton, David. **Motherfuckers: The Auschwitz of Oz.** Savoy [279 Deansgate, Manchester M3 4EW], ISBN 0-86130-098-X, 250pp, hardcover (?), no price shown. (Horror novel, first edition; proof copy received; the author of the banned-but-praised *Lard Horror* [1989] has produced what appears to be an even more outrageous follow-up). *27th August 1996.*

Cobb, James. **Choosers of the Slain.** Headline, ISBN 0-7472-1749-1, 313pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Near-future technothriller, first published in the USA [?], 1996; proof copy received; about futuristic warships, it's a debut novel by a new author, probably American but possibly British, whom the publishers are comparing to Tom Clancy; the prose seems appropriately clunky.) *8th August 1996.*

Cole, Allan. **The Warrior Returns.** "An Epic Fantasy of the Anteros." Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-394S9-3, 344pp, hardcover, cover by Gnemo, $23. (Fantasy novel, first edition; fourth and last in the series which began with *The Far Kingdoms* by Allan Cole and Chris Bunch; Cole has written this finale on his own, while Bunch has gone off to fry other fish [see *The Wind After Time* by Bunch, listed in our last issue].) *Late entry: 11th April publication, received in May 1996.*

Compton, D. G. **Back of Town Blues.** "An Alec Duncan mystery." Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06253-3, 208pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Crime novel, set "a few minutes into the future"; first edition; follow-up to *Justice City*.) *16th May 1996.*

Cringely, Robert X. **Accidental Empires: How the Boys of Silicon Valley Make Their Millions, Battle Foreign Competition, and Still Can't Get a Date.** Revised and updated edition. "Now the Channel 4 series *The Triumph of the Nerds*." Penguin, ISBN 0-14-025826-4, xiii+3S8pp, B-format paperback, £7.99. (Popular technology history, first published in the USA, 1996; the first edition appeared in 1992; about the rise of the personal-computer industry, this may not have much to do with sf, but it was sent to us by Penguin's film-and-TV tie-in department, and it turned out to be a most enjoyable read; recommended!) *Late entry: 4th April publication, received in May 1996.*

Flewelling, Lynn. **Luck in the Shadows.** Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-SS3-S7S42-2, 479pp, A-format paperback, $5.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; this is a debut book by a new American writer, commended by Stephen R. Donaldson and others.) *12th August 1996.*

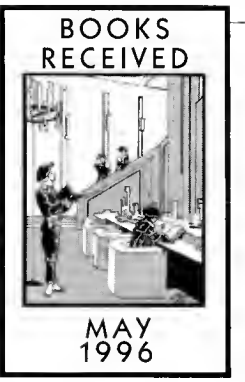
Gibson, William, and Bruce Sterling. **The Difference Engine.** Vista, ISBN 0-S7S-60029-2, 383pp, A-format paperback, cover by Ian Miller, £5.99. (Alternative-world sf novel, first published in 1990; reviewed by John Clute in *Interzone* 43; "Vista is an imprint of the Cassell Group," it says inside; the name "Gollancz" appears nowhere on title page, cover or spine, which seems a shame.) *30th May 1996.*

Grundy, Stephan. **Attila's Treasure.** Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-S53-37774-4, S49pp, trade paperback, cover by John Jude Palencar, $13.95. (Historical fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; the author's second novel, following his highly-praised *Rhinegold*; we are informed that the youthful, American-born, Germanophile, would-be Nordic warrior Grundy, who wrote his debut book while still a student, gained his PhD from Cambridge University in 199S [thesis entitled "The Cult of Odinn: God of Death?"] and now resides with his wife in Sweden, where his hobbies include "brewing, classical singing, metalworking, woodcarving, and hunting"; what, no body-building, no horse-riding, no swordsmanship...?) *12th August 1996.*

Grundy, Stephan. **Attila's Treasure.** Michael Joseph, ISBN 0-7181-3894-5, 496pp, C-format paperback, £10.99. (Historical fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1996; proof copy received.) *29th August 1996.*

Halam, Ann. **The Fear Man.** Orion/Dolphin, ISBN 1-85881-294-1, 13Spp, A-format paperback, £3.99. (Juvenile horror novel, first published in 199S; reviewed by Paul Brazier in *Interzone* 108; "Ann Halam" is a pseudonym of Gwyneth Jones.) *Late entry: 29th April publication, received in May 1996.*

Haldeman, Joe. **None So Blind.** Morrow/AvonNova, ISBN 0-688-14779-8, 289pp, hardcover, cover by Eric Peterson, $22. (Sf collection, first edition; it contains about a dozen stories and some poems, almost all from the 1990s, and including the novella version of his Hugo-winning short novel *The Hemingway Haax*; the title story also won a Hugo, in 199S.) *May 1996.*



Jones, Jenny. **The Blue Manor.** "A Dark Romance." Vista, ISBN 0-S75-60010-1, 352pp, A-format paperback, cover by J. Atkinson Grimshaw, £S.99. (Horror novel, first published in 1995; reviewed by Chris Gilmore in *Interzone* 99.) *30th May 1996.*

Kerr, Philip. **Gridiron.** "England's answer to Michael Crichton." Vintage, ISBN 0-09-959431-5, 373pp, B-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1995; Kerr [born 19S6, in Edinburgh] has a reputation as a thriller writer, but he seems to be turning to sf; about a near-future computerized building that goes haywire, this novel is oddly reminiscent of J. G. Ballard's *High-Rise* – with added thrills and hi-tech details.) *6th June 1996.*

Keyes, Daniel. **Flowers for Algernon.** Indigo, ISBN 0-S7S-40020-X, 216pp, B-format paperback, cover by Dan McCaul, £S.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1966; the classic tale of an intelligence-enhancement experiment and its aftermath; "Indigo" is the other new imprint of Cassell/Gollancz [see remarks under Gibson & Sterling, above].) *30th May 1996.*

Kilworth, Garry. **The Roof of Voyaging: Book 1 of *The Navigator Kings*.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-397-2, xvi+426pp, hardcover, cover by Mark Harrison, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; yet another change of publisher for Kilworth, as he joins the Orbit list with an interesting-looking fantasy based on Polynesian history and mythology.) *1st August 1996.*

Kirk, Pauline. **The Keepers.** "A powerfully imagined futuristic thriller." Virago, ISBN 1-85381-838-0, 405pp, C-format paperback, £9.99. (Sf novel, first edition; this is a second novel by a Birmingham-born poet and fiction-writer who lives in Leeds; like so many ventures into sf by mainstream authors, it seems to be cast in near-future dystopian mode; have you noticed? – "mainstreamers" almost never write space opera or planetary romance, or anything with a far-future setting, although of late some have shown a leaning towards alternative-world fiction.) *13th June 1996.*

Lee, Tanith. **Gold Unicorn.** Severn House, ISBN 0-7278-49SS-7, 179pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Young-adult fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1994; sequel to *Black Unicorn*; it has appeared previously in the UK as an Orbit paperback.) *20th June 1996.*

Lefanu, Sarah. **Writing Fantasy Fiction.** A. & C. Black, ISBN 0-7136-4260-2, 124pp, trade paperback, £8.99. (How-to manual, first edition; by a well-known critic, anthologist and former Women's Press sf/fantasy editor, this is a sane, sensible guidebook to fantasy and the problems of writing it; recommended.) *May 1996.*

Lumley, Brian. **Necroscope: The Lost Years, Volume I.** New English Library, ISBN 0-340-64962-3, 483pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Horror novel, first published in 199S; first in a new diptych which "fills a gap" in the author's previous "Necroscope" series.) *20th June 1996.*

McCaffrey, Anne, and Elizabeth Ann Scarborough. **Power Play.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-34S-38781-3, 342pp, A-format paperback, cover by Rowena, $S.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 199S; follow-up to *Powers That Be* and *Power Lines*.) *1st May 1996.*

McCaffrey, Anne, and Elizabeth Ann Scarborough. **Power Play.** Corgi, ISBN 0-552-14100-3, 332pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1995.) *6th June 1996.*

Mann, Phillip. **The Burning Forest: A Land Fit for Heroes, Book 4.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-S7S-061S2-9, 2SSpp, hardcover, cover by Michael Posen, £16.99. (Alternative-world sf novel, first edition; this concludes the tetralogy about a Britain where the Romans never left.) *6th June 1996.*

Mann, Phillip. **The Dragon Wakes: A Land Fit for Heroes, Volume 3.** Vista, ISBN 0-575-60012-8, 263pp, hardcover, cover by Adrian Chesterman, £4.99. (Alternative-world sf novel, first published in 199S.) *6th June 1996.*

Marks, Graham. **Fault Line.** Bantam Action, ISBN 0-SS3-S0393-6, 188pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Young, £3.S0. (Juvenile sf novel, first edition; about dinosaurs and time-travel, it appears to be a debut novel by a British author "well-known for his reviews of children's literature in *Publishing News*.") *6th June 1996.*

Martin, George R. R. **A Game of Thrones: Book One of *A Song of Ice and Fire*.** Bantam/Spectra, ISBN 0-S53-10354-7, 663pp, hardcover, $21.9S. (Fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; a blockbuster, in standard heroic-fantasy mould, by an author hitherto best known for his sf and his TV scripts.) *12th August 1996.*

Middleton, Haydn. **The Queen's Captive: A Mordred Cycle Novel.** Little, Brown, ISBN 0-316-91368-5, 244pp, hardcover, cover by Stephen Player, £1S.99. (Arthurian fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received; a follow-up to last year's *The King's Evil*, this one concerns Morgan le Fay.) *22nd August 1996.*

Nasaw, Jonathan. **The World on Blood.** Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-67446-6, 361pp, hardcover, cover by George Underwood, £16.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1996; the author, who lives in Northern California, is said to have written three previous novels, although we're not told of what type; this one is about vampires.) *6th June 1995.*

Palmer, Warren James. **Dominator: Book Two of The Dyason.** Ripping Publishing [PO Box 286, Epsom, Surrey KT19 9YG], ISBN 1-899884-02-5, iv+416pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf novel, first edition; here we have that rare phenomenon – a second book in a self-published series [most never seem to get beyond volume one]; as before, it's a proper, professionally-printed, mass-market paperback.) *5th June 1996.*

Pickover, Clifford A. **Black Holes: A Traveler's Guide.** Wiley, ISBN 0-471-12580-6, hardcover, £19.99. (Popular science text, first published in the USA, 1996; although seriously intended and full of hard physics and mathematics, this is almost in the nature of an sf game-book: as the blurb states, "acclaimed author Clifford Pickover's inventive premise finds you the captain of a spaceship who, along with your first mate, probes the mysteries of the most interesting and elusive objects in the universe"; there are many illustrations and diagrams, including eight pages of full-colour computer-generated pics; Arthur C. Clarke commends it on the cover.) *30th May 1996.*

Reichert, Mickey Zucker. **Beyond Ragnarok: The Renshai Chronicles, Volume One.** Orion/Millennium, ISBN 1-8S798-446-3, 676pp, C-format paperback, cover by Steve Crisp, £9.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 199S; the imprint name "Millennium" has gone from the title page of this one, though it appears in small print on the back cover; it seems as though Orion really are phasing the name out.) *17th June 1996.*

Rice, Anne. **Servant of the Bones.** Chatto & Windus, ISBN 0-7011-6515-4, 365pp, hardcover, £15.99. (Horror/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1996; proof copy received; Rice's latest bestseller-to-be is a sort of Wandering Jew story, the hero an immortal ancient Babylonian.) *1st August 1996.*

Robinson, Nigel. **Second Nature.** Point SF, ISBN 0-590-SS837-4, 261pp, A-format paperback, cover by Steinar Lund, £3.99. (Young-adult sf novel, first edition.) *May 1996.*



Rusch, Kristine Kathryn. **The Fey: Changeling.** Orion/Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-484-6, 314pp, hardcover, cover by David O'Connor, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1996; there is a simultaneous C-format paperback edition [not seen].) *20th May 1996.*

Savage, Felicity. **Humility Garden: An Unfinished Biography.** Penguin/Roc, ISBN 0-451-45518-5, 352pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1995; a debut book, written by an American 18-year-old, it's being compared to the erotic fantasy of Tanith Lee.) *30th May 1996.*

Slade, Michael. **Zombie.** Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-65777-4, 473pp, hardcover, cover by Chris Moore, £16.99. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1996; a new "Special X Unit of the RCMP" serial-killer novel by this team of pseudonymous Canadian authors; for the uninitiated, RCMP stands for Royal Canadian Mounted Police – so, yes, it's a "Mountie novel," of sorts, although clearly we're a long way from the innocent days of Muriel Denison's *Susannah: A Little Girl with the Maunties* [1937] and its like.) *6th June 1995.*

Stableford, Brian. **The Hunger and Ecstasy of Vampires.** Mark V. Ziesing [PO Box 76, Shingletown, CA 96088, USA], ISBN 0-929480-80-5, 207pp, hardcover, cover by Arnie Fenner, $25. (Sf/horror novel, first edition; a shorter version was serialized in *Interzone* in 1995 and won our readers' poll as the most popular story of the year; in an afterword Stableford mentions how he wrote this is a novel, which was rejected, then cut it down to a novella, which was rejected by the American magazines, then re-expanded it as a short novel, which we published in two parts, then re-expanded it once more to its original novel length for this small-press book publication; despite that checkered history, the story has been widely praised.) *No date shown: received in May 1996.*

Utter, Virgil, Gordon Benson, Jr., and Phil Stephensen-Payne. **Catherine Lucille Moore & Henry Kuttner: A Marriage of Souls and Talent–A Working Bibliography.** 4th edition. "Galactic Central Bibliographies for the Avid Reader, Volume 21." Galactic Central Publications [2SA Copgrove Rd., Leeds LS8 2SP], ISBN 1-871133-44-0, x+142pp, small-press paperback, £6. (Sf author bibliography; earlier editions were published in 1986, 1988 and 1989; this is the first in this long series of bibliographies to take the form of a proper, perfect-bound paperback volume – a vast improvement in format over the old quarto-sized booklets; recommended.) *Late entry: April publication, received in May 1996.*

Somtow, S. P. **The Pavilion of Frozen Women: Stories.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06120-0, 272pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Horror/fantasy collection, first published in the USA [?], 1996; proof copy received.) *25th July 1996.*

Stasheff, Christopher. **The Shaman: The Star Stone, Book One.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-39247-7, 328pp, A-format paperback, cover by Stephen Youll, $5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1995.) *1st May 1996.*

Sterling, Bruce. **Globalhead.** Phoenix, ISBN 1-85799-444-2, 296pp, B-format paperback, cover by Peter Gudynas, £5.99. (Sf collection, first published in the USA, 1992.) *3rd June 1996.*

Sterling, Bruce. **Holy Fire.** Orion/Millennium, ISBN 1-85798-462-5, 296pp, hardcover, cover by Holly Warburton, £16.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA [?], 1996.) *17th June 1996.*

Stout, Amy. **The Sacred Seven.** New English Library, ISBN 0-340-65362-0, 300pp, A-format paperback, cover by Geoff Taylor, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1996; this is a debut novel by a fairly well-known American publishers' editor [in charge of the US Penguin/Roc line], who is married to novelist Alan Rodgers.) *6th June 1996.*

Tilley, Patrick. **Star Wartz: Tales of Adventure from the Rimworld.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-320-4, 409pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Humorous sf novel, first published in 1995.) *13th June 1996.*

Watson, Ian. **Hard Questions.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06189-8, 288pp, hardcover, £16.99. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; this is the promised "quantum computer" novel – see the note following Watson's story in *Interzone* 106.) *20th June 1996.*

Watt-Evans, Lawrence. **The Reign of the Brown Magician: Volume Three of The Three Worlds Trilogy.** Del Rey, ISBN 0-345-37247-6, 342pp, A-format paperback, cover by Nicholas Jainschigg, $5.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first edition.) *1st May 1996.*

Weis, Margaret, and Don Perrin. **Robot Blues: The Knights of the Black Earth, Volume II.** Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-06168-5, 382pp, hardcover, cover by Les Edwards, £16.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1996; proof copy received.) *8th August 1995.*

White, James. **The Galactic Gourmet: A Sector General Novel.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-86167-2, 288pp, hardcover, $21.95. (Sf novel, first edition; proof copy received; veteran British author White has been producing this medical sf series for decades, but this is the first new novel we've seen for a number of years: its hardcover US publication seems to have been sparked by his imminent attendance as Guest of Honour at this year's World SF Convention in Los Angeles; there's no word so far of a British edition – yet another prophet without honour in his own country.) *August 1996.*

Wylie, Jonathan. **Across the Flame.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-395-6, 376pp, hardcover, cover by Keith Scaife, £16.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; "Jonathan Wylie" is a pseudonym of Mark and Julia Smith.) *13th June 1996.*

Wylie, Jonathan. **Other Lands.** Orbit, ISBN 1-85723-364-6, 360pp, A-format paperback, cover by Keith Scaife, £5.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1995.) *13th June 1996.*

Yarbro, Chelsea Quinn. **Mansions of Darkness: A Novel of Saint-Germain.** Tor, ISBN 0-312-85759-4, 430pp, hardcover, $24.95. (Historical horror/fantasy novel, first edition; proof copy received.) *August 1996.*

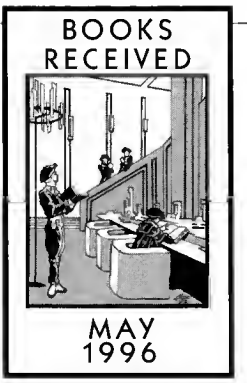
Spinoffery

This is a list of all books received that fall into those sub-types of sf, fantasy and horror which may be termed novelizations, recursive fictions, spinoffs, sequels by other hands, shared worlds and sharecrops (including non-fiction about shared worlds, films and TV, etc.). The collective term "Spinoffery" is used far the sake of brevity.

Anderson, Kevin J. **Ground Zero.** "The X-Files." Voyager, ISBN 0-00-648206-6, 292pp, A-format paperback, £5.99. (Sf/horror TV-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1995; based on the characters created by writer-producer Chris Carter.) *3rd June 1996.*

Anderson, Kevin J. **Ruins.** "The X-Files." Voyager, ISBN 0-00-224637-6, 291pp, hardcover, cover by Cliff Neilson, £12.99. (Sf/horror TV-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1996; based on the characters created by Chris Carter; this one is a lost-city-in-the-Mexican-jungle tale; like so much spinoffery, it's the purest old-fashioned pulp under a modern veneer.) *17th June 1996.*

Archer, Nathan. **Martian Deathtrap.** "Mars Attacks."



Del Rey, ISBN 0-34S-4049S-S, 243pp, hardcover, cover by Ken Steacy, $18. (Sf spinoff novel, inspired by a set of 1960s chewing-gum trading cards and a subsequent comic-book series; it's copyright "Topps Comics, Inc."; a Tim Burton-directed movie is promised; it seems to be based at least vaguely on H. G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds*; the opening words of the Prologue are: "No one believed in the last years of the twentieth century that Earth was being watched keenly and closely by intelligences that thought themselves far greater than mere humans" – which is a lame pastiche of Wells's magnificent opening passage.) *1st May 1996.*

Conrad, Dean. **Star Wars: The Genesis of a Legend.** Valis Books [15b Bloom Grove, West Norwood, London SE27 0HZ], ISBN 0-9S1-6251-6-0, S8pp, very large-format small-press paperback, cover by Richard Hunt, £12.99. (Fannish critique of the *Star Wars* sf movie series created by George Lucas; first edition; with its double-columned pages, it's longer than it seems; the cover is black and white, and amateurish; there are a few internal illustrations, mainly publicity photos.) *No date shown: received in May 1996.*

Cornell, Paul. **Happy Endings.** "Doctor Who: The New Adventures." Virgin/ Doctor Who, ISBN 0-426-20470-0, 291pp, A-format paperback, cover by Paul Campbell, £4.99. (Sf television-series spinoff novel, first edition; this one is billed as the S0th "New Adventure" [the fifth by Cornell], and there has been a cover-redesign for the series; unfortunately, we seem to have missed the previous two novels – *Sleepy* by Kate Orman, and *Death and Diplomacy* by Dave Stone – which were not sent to us for review; and Virgin have ceased putting slips in the books to inform us of exact publication dates.) *May (?) 1996.*

Crandall, Melissa. **Earth 2.** Warner, ISBN 0-7S1S-1743-7, 264pp, A-format paperback, £S.99. (Sf TV-series novelization, first published in the USA, 1994; "based on the teleplay written by Michael Duggan, Carol Flint, Mark Levin.") *13th June 1996.*

Derleth, August. **The Trail of Cthulhu.** "A Novel of Supernatural Horror in the Cthulhu Mythos." Carroll & Graf, ISBN 0-7867-0341-S, 248pp, A-format paperback, $4.9S. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1962; it's a "fix-up" of five pastiche H. P. Lovecraft stories from the 1940s and 19S0s.) *June 1996.*

Foster, Alan Dean. **Splinter of the Mind's Eye.** "Star Wars." Warner, ISBN 0-7S1S-1738-0, 297pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf movie-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1978; it's "based on the characters and situations created by George Lucas"; the first in what has now become a long line of *Star Wars* spinoffs, this repackaged edition contains a new two-page preface by Lucas.) *2nd May 1996.*

Friedman, Michael Jan. **Kahless.** "Star Trek: The Next Generation." Pocket, ISBN 0-671-S4779-8, x+307pp, hardcover, cover by James Wang, £9.99. (Sf TV-series spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1996; this is the American first edition with a British price added.) *July 1996.*

Hinton, Craig. **Godengine.** "Doctor Who: The New Adventures." Virgin/Doctor Who, ISBN 0-426-20473-S, 243pp, A-format paperback, cover by Peter Elson, £4.99. (Sf television-series spinoff novel, first edition.) *20th June 1996.*

Jacobs, Matthew. **Doctor Who: The Script of the Film.** "He's back ... and it's about time!" Introduction by Philip Segal. BBC Books, ISBN 0-S63-40499-X, 126pp, B-format paperback, £S.99. (Sf TV movie script, first edition; it's illustrated with eight pages of colour photographs from the BBC/Universal TV co-production starring Paul McGann.) *15th May 1996.*

Langford, David. **The Unseen University Challenge: Terry Pratchett's Discworld Quizbook.** Vista, ISBN 0-S7S-60000-4, 224pp, A-format paperback, cover by Josh Kirby, £3.99. (Quizbook based on Pratchett's humorous fantasy novels, first edition; compiled by *Interzone*'s own "Ansible Link" columnist, it's formidably erudite – and we recommend it, naturally.) *23rd May 1996.*

Lyons, Steve. **Killing Ground.** "Doctor Who: The Missing Adventures." Virgin/Doctor Who, ISBN 0-426-20474-3, 246pp, A-format paperback, cover by Alister Pearson, £4.99. (Sf television-series spinoff novel, first edition.) *20th June 1996.*

Murill, Ray W. **War Dogs of the Golden Horde.** "Mars Attacks." Del Rey, ISBN 0-34S-40496-3, 281pp, hardcover, cover by Peter Scanlan, $18. (Sf spinoff novel, inspired by a set of 1960s chewing-gum trading cards and a subsequent comic-book series; it's copyright "Topps Comics, Inc."; a note on the author states that "under various bylines, he has sent The Destroyer, The Executioner, Doc Savage, Superman, and Batman into action... His hobby is cracking writers' pseudonyms, and he invites would-be literary sleuths to solve the riddle of his current byline"; gosh, we can't resist such a challenge, but the answer is too easy – it can only be pulp *aficianada* Will Murray.) *1st May 1996.*

Parkin, Lance. **A History of the Universe.** "Doctor Who." Virgin/Doctor Who, ISBN 0-426-20471-9, vii+273pp, B-format paperback, cover by Alister Pearson, £7.99. (Sf TV-series "non-fiction" spinoff, first edition; it's basically an elaborate timeline which traces "the Doctor Who Universe from Event One to its final destruction tens of billions of years in the future.") *No date shown: received in May 1996.*

Russell, Gary. **Doctor Who.** "The novel of the film." BBC Books, ISBN 0-S63-38000-4, 223pp, A-format paperback, £3.99. (Sf TV movie novelization, first edition; based on a script by Matthew Jacobs; it's illustrated with eight pages of colour photographs from the BBC/Universal TV co-production starring Paul McGann; the author has written two previous "Who" novels for Virgin.) *15th May 1996.*

Smith, Bill. **Star Wars: The Essential Guide to Vehicles and Vessels.** Illustrated by Doug Chiang and Troy Vigil. Del Rey, ISBN 0-34S-39299-X, xxii+201pp, very large-format paperback, $18. (Illustrated guide to the imaginary spacecraft and other machines in the *Star Wars* sf movie series created by George Lucas; first edition.) *Late entry: 7th March publication, received in May 1996.*

Solow, Herbert J., and Robert H. Justman. **Inside Star Trek: The Real Story.** Pocket, ISBN 0-671-89628-8, xx+4S8pp, hardcover, cover by John Knoll, £19.99. (Illustrated "making of" the 1960s sf TV series, first published in the USA, 1996; it has been done before, but never in such depth and by such experts; principal author Solow was the production executive at Desilu Studios who hired Gene Roddenberry and supervised the series' two pilot episodes; co-author Justman was a producer on the first series; this is the American first edition with a British price added.) *15th June 1996.*

Stackpole, Michael A. **Wedge's Gamble: X-Wing, Book Two.** "Star Wars." Bantam, ISBN 0-SS3-40923-9, x+3S7pp, A-format paperback, £4.99. (Sf movie spinoff novel, first published in the USA, 1996.) *6th June 1996.*

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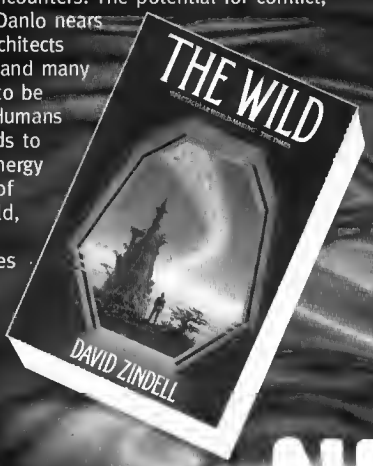
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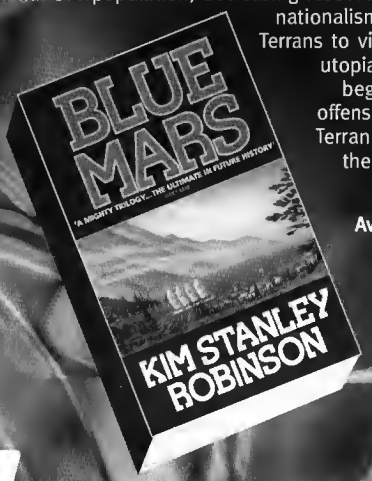
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